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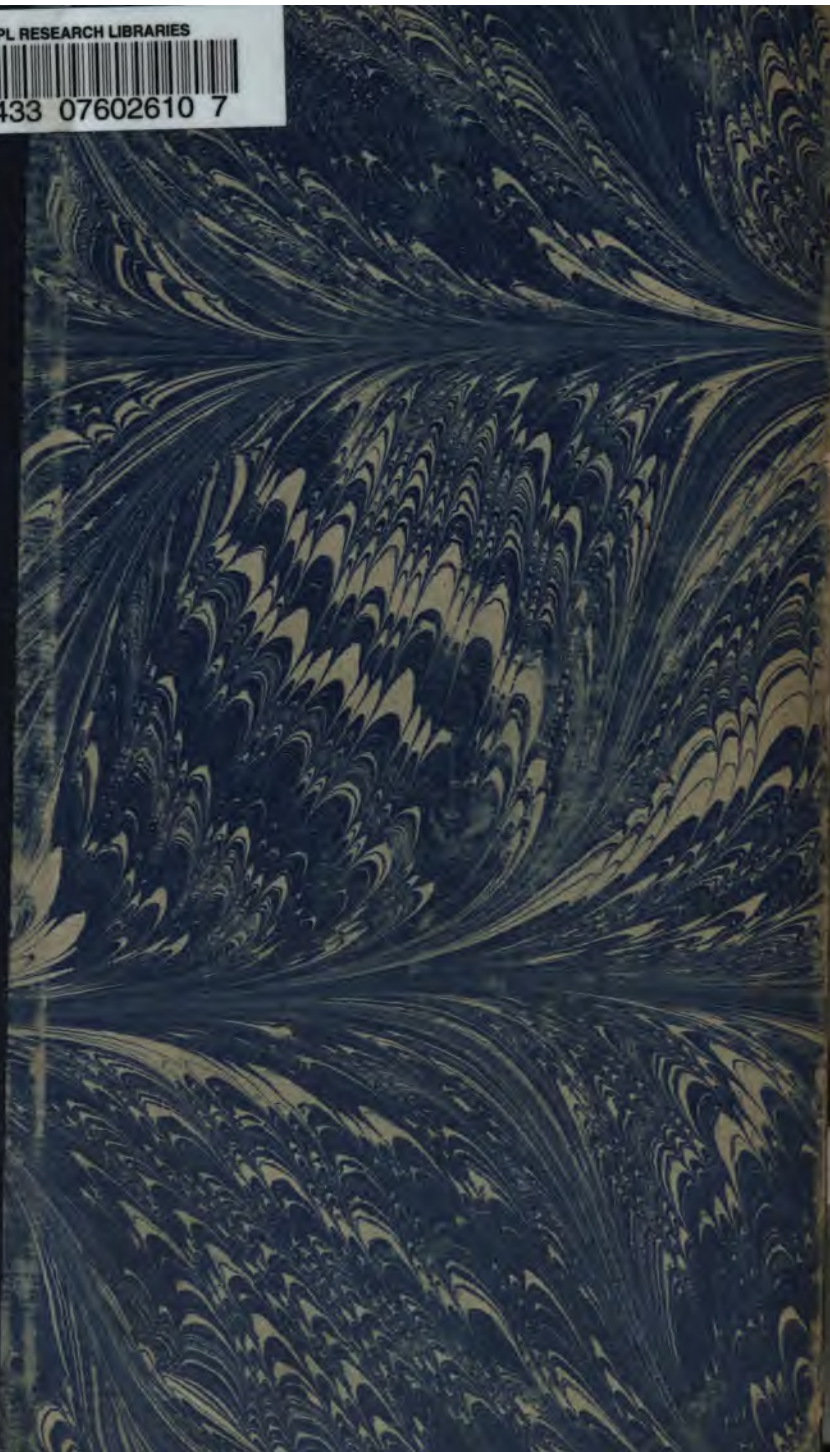
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BABETTE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

A VILLAGE OF VAGABONDS

—

THE REAL LATIN QUARTER

—

THE LADY OF BIG SHANTY

—

PARISIANS OUT-OF-DOORS

—

IN LONDON TOWN

—

THE STREET OF THE TWO FRIENDS

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"BABETTE"

From a portrait by Oliver Herford

BABETTE

A NOVEL

BY
E. BERKELEY SMITH



GARDEN CITY NEW YORK
DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY
1916



"BABETTE"

From a portrait by Oliver Herford

BABETTE

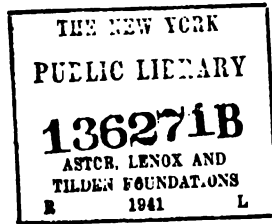
A NOVEL

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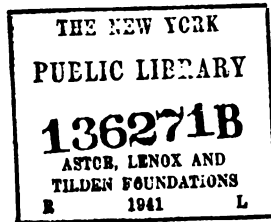
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BABETTE



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BABETTE

BABETTE

CHAPTER ONE

A COCK crew from down below in the village. The storm of the night before had thrashed itself out over the swift yellow river, and in the sparkling sunshine which ensued this rare September morning the bell for mass quavered and clanged.

As its last note wavered in the soft breeze up the sheer flank of the great rock towering above the snug village at its base, Babette awakened.

At eighteen, one does not awaken all at once. Babette's rosy lips, which long before the cock crew had been parted in a dream, now closed as tight as her eyes, which had not opened once all night, though the wind had had its voice beneath her door until nearly dawn, buffeting against her window, whimpering in the tiniest cracks, lashing the tops of the great trees without, bending them until they groaned, playing havoc with the poor old river until it leaped onward in a panic, deluging its banks.

A mouse stealing unobserved across the clean wooden floor of Babette's small bedroom, whose

dimity-curtained window, piercing the thick white-washed wall, looked out upon the sunmit of the great rock, might have stopped to notice Babette stir lazily beneath an old-fashioned patchwork coverlet of faded blues—blues in pretty contrast to her fair blond hair. She turned with a deep sigh of content. Again her rosebud mouth opened, revealing the gleam of her white teeth as she drew from beneath her rosy cheek the loveliest of fair young arms, and passed a small hand wearily through her wealth of golden hair, damp from the stupor of sleep.

The little room itself was as plain as an alcove in a village church. A tiny mirror which glimmered at you askew hung above an earthen pitcher and basin; above the cot bed a silvered crucifix, while upon a three-legged stool lay neatly piled a petticoat of red flannel, thick, strongly knit stockings of darker blue than the quilt, a corselet of homespun linen, and, beneath, a pair of small, heelless, wooden sabots.

Who can describe the sacred beauty of innocence? It is intangible, ethereal in its grace, an undefinable beauty which has a certain radiance about it which is indescribable. To describe the vision of innocence is a sacrilege; it is the refinement of profanity. To spy upon an angel, to glance slyly into the nest of the lark, before the lark is up—— Parbleu! is it not better that we do not attempt to describe it at all?

As the bell for mass ceased ringing, its last note a sharp tap of reproof, Monsieur Pivot also awakened, just at the very moment when Babette was again

about to fall asleep, almost as bad a habit with her as day-dreaming when she drew on her strongly knit stockings of dark blue wool.

Monsieur Pivot, being fifty-six and not eighteen, leaped from his bed briskly. He was a nervous, quick-eyed, wiry little man with a swarthy skin, as dark as Babette's was fair. Their complexions were as different as leather from a tea-rose. Indeed, Babette's skin was so pink and clear it seemed translucent. It gave to her features when she was wide awake or singing, when she cooked or tidied up her room, an eager brilliancy. You might have noticed, too, that she was of that pure type of French girl whose cheek-bones were high and slightly prominent. She had an energetic way of carrying her pretty blond head proudly; when she spoke, she had a habit of ducking to you a funny little decisive nod at the end of her sentences. Nothing could be more attractive than her frank smile, which is often the proof of a nature full of gentle seriousness. Every one but Babette knew that she was the prettiest girl in the village.

Monsieur Pivot, having sprung from his bed, went over and peered out of a deep-sunken window in the room in which he slept, and which looked out upon a tiny garden gay in roses. Here he stood for some moments tugging at his trim imperial beard, his short active body bent like a jackknife as he glanced with a smile of satisfaction at the warm sunshine without.

"Ah!" exclaimed Monsieur Pivot, rubbing his hands with delight, since it had poured in torrents for a week. He left the window, thrust his feet into a pair of carpet slippers, fumbled in a corner cupboard for a sulphur match, scratched it under a worm-eaten table of solid oak, and slipped its sputtering flame into a little stove as round as a cannon-ball and choked with shavings.

Again Babette stirred as the sound of the crackling fire reached her small pink ears. This time she half opened her deep violet eyes, but again the soft warm arm went to nestle beneath her cheek.

The gentle breeze drove the smoke in pungent blue rifts down into the snug garden while Monsieur Pivot washed and shaved, scrubbing his wiry neck with a coarse towel until it glowed. His toilet over, he drew on a pair of neatly blackened boots, got into a pair of dark green trousers with a military stripe, buttoned up jauntily ten shining brass buttons of a jacket to match the trousers, the last button securing a standing collar beneath his imperial, and having carefully waxed his moustache to needle-points by the aid of a small mirror framed in glued sea-shells, reached above it, unhooked a formidable iron key half as long as his forearm, and strode out into the garden by way of a whitewashed antechamber provided with an old-fashioned dresser and seven rusty implements of torture.

In the garden, Monsieur Pivot bent to smell a rose—a tender bud, less rosy than Babette's young mouth.

Then he turned back into the antechamber and called to a half-closed door:

“Babette!”

“Yes, father.”

“You may prepare the coffee, my little rabbit.”

He turned back into the garden and glanced up genially at the blue sky, then he went his way singing down a narrow path hedged with daisies.

He had a happy nature for a jailer, had Monsieur Pivot.

CHAPTER TWO

NO ONE who has ever stood in this garden but has been impressed by the gruesomeness of its surroundings, even upon a sunlit September morning, for it lies, snug and smiling, back of two sinister towers belonging to one of the most powerful dungeons in all France, whose history, dating from the ninth century, is replete with confinement, torture, and death. This was precisely what its invincible walls were built for—a stronghold for horror—and it served its purpose stubbornly until the very end of Feudalism.

The one bright spot in this mountain of misery is the garden, which reminds one of a bouquet that has fallen to the bottom of a pit. There is no purgatory without its glimpse of Paradise.

At the end of the garden is a cavernous, rectangular well, its sheer walls ascending from the gloom below until they mount to the level of the towers, its seven floors long since rotted and fallen through. A flight of stone steps, green with slime, lead down to its ghostly floor, and to a low door giving entrance to another cavernous, roofless rectangle, twice as large as its mate. Its grim walls, pierced here and there by the outlets of secret passages, indicating the level

of its bygone floors and the evil of its bygone tyrants.

High above, circling against the blue sky, crows croak dismally. In the crevices and crannies of the oozing walls bats squeak, and rats and owls—all in bad company—have found a loathsome lodging for centuries.

Even at noon the place makes one shiver. In winter it takes a stout heart to stand within the carcasses of these hideous chambers alone. At night they become terrible. Down, down, down—deep beneath the ground, turning, twisting in a labyrinth of passages and dire holes, lost from sound and the light of day—lies a Hell.

I have said that the one bright spot in this grim place was the garden. That is erroneous: the one bright spot in it was Babette.

She had known these stern, forbidding walls all her life, having been born in the whitewashed room with the oaken table—the same room in which Madame Pivot died at her birth.

When Babette was able to toddle, she would spend hours before the great entrance gate playing with wild-flowers, mud, and her doll, whose flaxen hair was as fair as her own—hours when she grew to know the village nestled below mostly by its tiled roofs, for she was seldom taken down there, and only now and then the children from the village strayed up the grass-grown path that led to the prison to cast a shy, distrustful glance at her and disappear in awe, she being the daughter of the jailer.

Babette, like the pink rose in the garden, had grown to beauty, sheltered by the grim towers—a flower imprisoned in a mountain.

She knew by heart, even when little, the ghostly chambers, and named them in turn after her own fashion.

The one with the slimy stairs she called “The Church.” The greater chamber she named “The Palace” where the fairies lived; the owls were good fairies, the rats their servants, the bats brought bad news; the crows were their guards.

When Babette was old enough to go to school in the village, she was taken down by the Mère Truchard in the morning after she had milked her cows, and back at sunset by the cows and the Mère Truchard when she had finished her third milking in the green pasture skirting the river.

At school she was shy, gentle, and timid, and was regarded by the other children as a curiosity, apart. They did not say, “Here comes Babette”; they said, “There she is,” as if she were not one of them. How could she be, being the little girl of the jailer?

One does not romp with the daughter of the hangman.

Babette, like the budding rose, had grown up. At eighteen she had become a slender girl, graceful in her movements, very straight, almost gracious, though totally unconscious of it; even though you looked straight into her soft violet eyes, that looked straight into yours, or let your gaze wander over her

fair hair and finely chiselled features, noted the suppleness of her young body, her small hands, her dainty feet, and waited until she laughed with you, baring her even white teeth, hidden when she was silent by a sensitive mouth, firm when sad, frank and laughing to the world when she was happy; and when Babette was happy now, it was because she saw at eighteen those rare glimpses of the outside world that every prisoner understands.

Let us be truthful. Let us admit she was no longer a child; that she adored her father; that she held in her impressionable young heart a certain loyal love for her grim surroundings, as one looks back with pride upon the ruins of one's family château. To her its very grimness was an old friend from babyhood.

It did not deter her, however, from thinking about Paris, which she had never seen, or from dreaming over the half-dozen odd novels of her father's which she knew by heart. Monsieur Pivot knew nothing of their romantic contents, although they had belonged to Madame Pivot.

"These," he had the habit of saying with a shrug at the shelf, "are for idlers; soldiers have no time to read. As for books, it takes a harder head than mine to know all the history of France; but what I know I know—ah! that!" And he would turn abruptly on his heel and pace away, as if to avoid within earshot the compliment of his listener.

Monsieur Pivot, as he left the path hedged by dai-

sies, skirted the cavernous chambers halfway up their ghostly depths by a soggy path which ended in a low massive doorway. Once within, he gripped in the dark an iron hand-rail, which wound itself in a cold sweat up a narrow stairway. At the second landing a glimmer of light disclosed a door of solid oak, heavily barred and bolted. It was at this door that Monsieur Pivot stopped, slid back a shutter, peered in, glanced at his watch, shot back the bolts, and, inserting the big key in a creaky lock, turned it twice over. The door swung back on its hinges with a hollow groan, as if it echoed some of the misery it had concealed in the past.

"Good-morning, my friends!" cried Monsieur Pivot, his cheery voice ringing in the stone room beyond.

In the half-light from a high-barred window a form on an iron cot rolled out of a blanket with a yawn.

It was the village drunkard, Barbouche. He sat up with a grin, rubbed his shock of gray hair, and squinted a sleepy eye at his jailer.

"Sacred name of a dog!" said he pleasantly, "but you have an early service at your hotel, my good Pivot! Eh! Javarde! wake up—it's the patron." He leaned over and punched him in the ribs.

Javarde, the carter, a fat, pin-eyed little man, round as a keg, with a red face, and a steel hook for a right hand, slid out of his blanket in his sock feet. He absently shook Pivot's proffered hand nimbly with his left, and sat gazing bewildered at the floor

with a dull eye, still groggy from the day before, when he had been found snoring on the roadside in the rain beside a cask of the best of medoc he had tapped in transit to its destination, the village inn of the "Cerf Noir"—a sound red wine, which warmed him until he sang, and sent him reminiscencing of the past over the respective characters of the two viragoes he had been fool enough to marry.

"Eh! neighbour!" shouted Barbouche, to a form in the corner. A lean, red-haired fellow, whose gaunt hands could snare a rabbit or net a partridge in the dark as easily as he could drink, slipped out of his blanket with the quickness of a weasel.

It was René Jean, the poacher, better known in the district as "Fille-patte," or "Patte-de-Chat," more familiarly as "Pussy-Paw," owing to his sly skill, often more briefly as "The Cat."

Monsieur Pivot eyed his three prisoners with a smile tempered with the importance of his position. Both Barbouche and Javarde were old friends of his. Inwardly he was glad when they arrived. They cheered up the long evenings when Babette was asleep. They made them merry and short. There was no better hand at cards than Barbouche when he was sober. As for Pussy-Paw, he had him but seldom. Pussy-Paw, like the black fox reported in the neighbourhood, was rarely seen.

Pussy-Paw had rare gifts. At close quarters he possessed that talent of dissimulating his lean body with the ground as easily as a hare. His tread was as

noiseless as a cat's, and by sheer instinct he avoided cracking brush. The woods had long since been an open book to him. He had accustomed his keen vision to the illusions in Nature: the shimmer of heat at noon over the open places, distorting distances; the thin veil of mist at dawn which magnifies; the mystery of shadows in the moonlight, and in the dark he saw as well as any of his prey.

"Ah!" exclaimed Pivot, "it is a glorious day. Have you slept well?"

"As sound as three weasels," grinned Pussy-Paw, slipping his slim feet deftly into his sabots.

There came a gentle rap at the door. Monsieur Pivot laid a finger on his nose and winked knowingly.

"Coffee," he whispered with a smile, and turned to the door.

Monsieur Pivot loved to take his coffee with his prisoners; it was gayer than in his room.

"The Mère Truchard was late with the milk," explained Babette from the landing, as she passed to her father four steaming bowls and half a loaf of bread. He took the tray from her with care while she kissed him good-morning on both cheeks.

"Sacristi!" exclaimed Barbouche, "but you are a good one. One is well under your roof, Friend Pivot," he declared, shaking his grizzled head as he sopped his bread in his coffee. "The jailer at 'Les Fourches' is a gentleman with no manners."

"He's a rough old number," put in Javarde. "Bar-

bouche is right; we stopped there in April during the bad weather."

"Thrice the son of a pig," added Pussy-Paw with more knowledge than they, for he knew them all, these country jailers, and had a certain pride in being locked up by the right one.

"What would you have?" returned Monsieur Pivot, sensibly touched by their compliments. "They can never say of Pivot that he has no heart. In duty—ah! in that I am as punctilious as a general, for I am a soldier," he exclaimed, tapping the medal over his heart. "Besides, one stomach is like another; it needs to be filled." A unanimous murmur of approval escaped the three.

"It's not because some of us once in a while like our little fling that we should be treated like swine," grumbled Barbouche. "What does the motto say: 'Liberté—Egalité—Fraternité'—there you are!" He paused to wipe his grizzled chin with the hairy back of his hand. "Mademoiselle Babette is well?" he added, lowering his hoarse voice reverently.

"Oh! la! la!" laughed Monsieur Pivot, "as if she ever were ill, that little one."

Pussy-Paw swilled down his coffee at a gulp. It had become a habit with him to swallow quickly. Javarde sipped his slowly, mumbling over its excellence, until he scrubbed the bowl clean with his last morsel of bread—a mark of respect to the host, since, among the peasantry in France, it is an offence to leave anything save the bones on one's plate. Besides,

Babette's coffee was so excellent that it perfumed the little whitewashed antechamber in which she made it, left a trace of its aroma as she passed through the garden, and heralded its fragrance all the way up the chill prison stairs. It was this fragrance which Monsieur Pivot scented and winked at even before he had heard her trim step on the landing.

"Ah!" ejaculated Monsieur Pivot, rubbing his hands as the four bowls were carefully laid aside on the stone floor. "It is my duty to announce to you that you are now free, my friends."

There ensued a triple grunt of satisfaction.

"But," continued Monsieur Pivot, "it is Saturday, and the prison is open to visitors. I expect a heavy day to-day; as a rule they come here first. There is already an automobile of the rich Americans at the inn of the Cerf Noir. If it would not be"—here Monsieur Pivot paused, elevated his eyebrows, and confided gently—"if it would not inconvenience you, gentlemen, would you mind waiting until noon? I have a slight favour to ask. You can easily hear my foot on the stairs; very well! When you do, rattle the chains in the corner, and groan a little. You understand, my friends, my position. One must preserve one's reputation, one's career, as a jailer. What is a jail without prisoners? Bah! the thing is idiotic!"

"Parbleu!" echoed Barbouche with conviction.

"You're right!" agreed Javarde and Pussy-Paw.

"There are always two halves to a five-franc piece," added Monsieur Pivot.

Pussy-Paw's tongue clicked in his mouth.

Barbouche opened his eyes wide.

As for Javarde, he already saw his share in honest wine before him.

"I see you are astonished, my good Barbouche," exclaimed Monsieur Pivot. "But they give gold if they are well pleased, these American gentlemen. Besides, I show them *all*. Be polite to the ladies, that is what I say; as for the gentlemen—interest them—interest them. For instance, I have the boudoir cell of Mélice d'Anjou, she who befriended the Red Knight of Tarragon; I reserve that until the last, you understand?—with a special little explanation to Monsieur when the ladies are in the garden."

Pussy-Paw had risen. He drove his lean hand in his hip-pocket and stood there tugging at something enveloped in a newspaper and tightly bound with a fish-line; finally he got it free of his pocket.

"For Mademoiselle Babette, with my respects," said he. "I have always remembered how kind she was to me when I was here last."

Snipping the fish-line at the knot with his clasp-knife, and parting the newspaper, he pinched the breast of the fat partridge it contained with his thumb and forefinger, as Monsieur Pivot feigned a look of surprise, tempered with a smile.

"A solid little bird that no good pot ought to be

ashamed of," remarked the poacher as Monsieur Pivot again feigned a little confusion mingled with his thanks, though he half intimated that, "had it not been intended for Babette—after all, it is not *I*, gentlemen, who am responsible for Monsieur le Baron's game," he conferred with a convincing shrug, guessing where the partridge came from. "One has enough to do in life to do one's own duty as a jailer. Parbleu!"

"Parbleu!" reiterated all three.

A week before, Pussy-Paw lay late one night in the forest of the estate of the baron in question. Every little while, taking advantage of the onslaughts of wind and rain, he crawled nearer the château itself. He lay his lean length upon his stomach in the drenched brushwood—nothing escaped his small, keen eyes. He lay watching the wavering light of a lantern as it made the round of the château, carried by the second gamekeeper. He saw it leave the first floor in darkness, and watched it illumine the windows of the second floor, lighting on its way the great staircase back of its windows of stained glass. After some minutes the lantern descended, a small door in the cellar was opened, closed, and locked, and a moment later the second gamekeeper approached him in the wet leaves. The man passed within a rod of him and went his way. A hare, roused by the light, hopped close to his red, listening ear and vanished in a tangle of briars. Having made sure he was

at last alone, he took the impressions in beeswax of the keyhole to the cellar door, and that of a larger door to the right of it.

A few nights later the first gamekeeper shot over him to stop him as he was setting snares for rabbits. Being at close quarters, Pussy-Paw surrendered; the nights were growing cold, and he knew he would be well off under Pivot's roof. On the whole, he considered himself lucky; what he had been up to a few nights before had been far more serious. Babette's partridge was then next to his skin. It is the custom in France when one is visiting in the country to bring a present to the hostess.

Again Monsieur Pivot rubbed his hands briskly, and, stepping over to a huge chain linked to the massive wall, raised it and let it fall with a rattling crash.

"Take your choice, gentlemen," said he. "There are two others over there in the corner between the covered 'oubliettes,' and when I open the shutter and light the candle that Madame can see——" He raised his eyebrows and paused. "Ah! it is well; I see you understand," he exclaimed, and turned to go.

"Babette has the *Petit Parisien* of yesterday," he added, as his hand touched the door; "when she has finished reading it, I'll bring it to you." Again he paused for a moment as if lost in thought.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "I had almost forgotten! You know the pump, Barbouche? It pumps hard—it needs a new washer. If you are passing Duquesnes

this afternoon get me another; I shall be too busy to go down to the village." He tossed Barbouche a ten-sou piece and closed the heavy door with a clang.

Halfway down the cold stairs he stopped, tripped back to the landing, and turned the key in the lock. It was more prudent, seeing that the inspector of the prison was then in the village visiting his sweetheart.

CHAPTER THREE

IF THERE was one thing Monsieur Pivot prided himself upon it was the history of the prison. It was his custom now and then to go down to the village for a vermouth at the Cerf Noir. It was while he sat in the café of this ancient inn the day before, that he had perceived the automobile in the garage. He hurried over his vermouth and returned to the prison in haste, as the sun was still high, and one never could tell with foreigners. Had he not once had a party at midnight? However, the strangers did not appear, and he learned from the Mère Truchard that evening that they had gone to see the statue of Jeanne d'Arc, the church, and thence to dinner.

Barely had Monsieur Pivot time to retrace his steps, turn the key in the lock and regain the garden, before the bell over the entrance gate jingled. Babette ran to open it.

There entered a tall, heavy, businesslike gentleman, followed by a thin, gray-haired lady carrying a Baedeker and two postal cards. Aimlessly behind her wandered an angular girl, wearing gold-rimmed spectacles, a brown tailor-made, and a desiccated smile.

"Well, Em, I guess this is *it*, all right," declared the businesslike one to the lady.

The spectacled girl was absorbed in a letter from home.

"Got your kodak, Babe?" inquired the man sharply.

"Yes, she's got it," intervened the mother in an appeasing tone.

A tactful nudge from the mother now distracted the daughter's attention for a second to the grim towers.

"Wonder how long we've got here," grunted the man irritably. "It's a good sixty-seven kilome^trs to Ba-zanse, the chauffeur says."

"That's where father gets another omelette, I suppose," whispered the daughter. "If I see another omelette—well——"

"Hush!" interposed the mother. "Here comes the jailer."

Monsieur Pivot was now beside them, bowing. Inwardly he prided himself on his more than slight knowledge of English. He could decipher the lingo at the Cerf Noir on the Cross & Blackwell pickle jars with ease, and knew gin when he saw it in the bottle.

"Ask him how long we've got here, Babe" reiterated the father.

Monsieur Pivot bowed during the daughter's unintelligible attempt. Again the bell jingled. This time Babette opened the gate to a gentleman alone.

"Good-morning, Mademoiselle," said the stranger in perfect French, lifting his hat as he entered.

"You wish to see the prison, Monsieur?" ventured Babette.

"If it will not disturb you, Mademoiselle," said he.

For a brief moment the stranger gazed at her, meeting her eyes with a kindly smile.

"I will go and tell my father," said Babette, blushing, and closed the gate.

The stranger had an air about him of being perfectly at his ease. He was not yet thirty-five years old, yet his hair was of that silver-gray that by its strong contrast to his face heightened the ruddy youth of his features, and added a brighter gleam to his brown eyes. As he stood almost motionless apart from the rest you were impressed by his calm personality. He was of pleasing height and dressed in a comfortable suit of gray homespun, the coat encasing a well-built torso broadened by a pair of well-knit shoulders, indicating great physical strength. There was about his whole personality a quiet refinement denoting reserved force and energy. Had you drawn closer to him you would have observed that his almost classic features were bronzed by the sun. The firm mouth (clean-shaven, unlike most Frenchmen) would have given to his face the severity of a finely chiselled mask had it not been for his merry brown eyes, and his quiet smile as he spoke to Babette revealing his white teeth. He stood there, quietly folded his hands behind his back, and with that

delight of a man who knew the beauty of a ruin, scanned the great towers above him with silent interest. His eyes reverted now from the towers to follow Babette as she returned. Although there was nothing in their cheery gaze to have taken offence at, Babette blushed again. At eighteen a girl blushes as unconsciously as she breathes.

"Would you be amiable enough, Mademoiselle," said the stranger pleasantly, "to tell my chauffeur he need not wait?"

"Certainly, Monsieur."

"One moment, Mademoiselle!" The stranger drew from his pocket several gold pieces and placed one in Babette's hand. "This will pay for his services and luncheon," he added. "It is the smaller car of the two, the taxi from Tours."

"It is well, Monsieur."

Again the stranger stood gazing after her until Babette's fair little head disappeared through the gate.

"You wish to see the prison, Monsieur?" inquired Monsieur Pivot with his usual effusive politeness, awakening the stranger from his reverie.

"Yes, Monsieur," replied the stranger, "*all* of it," his eyes again reverting to the gate which Babette had left ajar.

"It is well," returned Monsieur Pivot with enthusiasm; "we shall then be five." He rubbed his hands and nodded to the waiting group.

"Monsieur is with them, I presume?"

"I am alone," returned the stranger quietly.

"A thousand pardons, Monsieur," exclaimed Pivot. "A moment, I pray you—my lantern—ah! I see my daughter has already foreseen the necessity," he smiled as he took the lantern from Babette. "This way, if you please."

The four visitors followed him down the garden path with that silence characteristic of personally conducted parties where a stranger is present.

Monsieur Pivot beamed with importance as he led them with infinite care down the slimy steps. Having assembled them upon the ghostly floor, he broke forth in history:

"Ah!" he began, his voice and gestures suddenly changed to those of a heavy tragedian, as he pointed to the outlet of a secret passage. "It was there that the Black Duke decided upon his victims. Hidden up in there behind that tiny slit you see," he went on tremulously, "the Black Duke muttered to his guards those he wished imprisoned who passed him, those whom he wished tortured. Those"—his voice sank solemnly—"whom he wished to die. From whence came such a tyrant? History stands aghast and shuddering at the evil deeds of this man——"

"What's he say?" inquired the man, nervously fumbling at his watch.

"He says it was up here that the Black Duke died."

"Come, you shall see," continued Monsieur Pivot. "Be careful, Mademoiselle, the stairs are slippery";

and he led the way below ground, the light of his lantern wavering in the darkness as they descended to the first tier of dungeons.

"It was in here," explained Monsieur Pivot, leading them into a cell, "that four holy fathers were imprisoned for ten years; for ten years, gentlemen, they did not see the light of day"—again his voice trembled dramatically—"save from what you can see dimly through this small hole in the roof, through which their food was passed. For ten years, gentlemen and ladies! and yet they lived! Are we not awed by such fortitude! And it was here in this mouth of darkness"—Monsieur Pivot recoiled, crouching at the low entrance to a vault—"it was through this door they pushed the condemned ones in." He suited the action to the words: gripping an imaginary victim in the dark, he rushed him by the shoulders into the vault. "Ha!" he cried, "thus it was done, quickly, with no pity, and there beyond, in the corner, is the black hole. It was called the 'Oubliette'"—(he said it lightly with a wave of his hand, being used to horrors)—"it leads to the river—Voilà! —the Oubliette!" Again shrugging his shoulders with awed resignation. "That into which one falls and—is—forgotten!!"

On he led them down, down among the labyrinth of cells, stairs, and passages.

"It was here"—he stopped again to explain—"that the tyrant came to gloat over his enemies. From this secret passage he came with his friends to

mock those groaning in agony. It is here from this gallery he looked down on his bishop hanging in chains. He would call out to him:

“‘Ha! Ha! my old one, how goes it? You were better off in the castle. Eh, blockhead! Food for swine! Vile dog! Devil’s tongue! Vile enemy! Drink gravel if thou art thirsty and pat thy hollow paunch!’ Even ladies were tortured here! Ah! yes, indeed! Mèlice of Anjou and St. Catherine the Gentle, trussed up like a turkey, gentlemen, they fried her alive at the top of the great tower——Permit me, ladies.”

He offered his hand to the girl and her mother at a sharp turn in the stairs that now led them to the landing before the locked and bolted door of his prisoners. A clanking crash of chains in the corridor reverberated at their approach.

The girl emitted a little scream.

“Do not be alarmed, Mademoiselle,” said Monsieur Pivot, “there is no danger; besides, I am with you.”

“Mercy!” gasped the mother. “You don’t mean to say there are prisoners here *now*?”

“Unhappily, Madame,” sighed Monsieur Pivot, who had caught the drift of her meaning by her gesture. He lowered his voice to a whisper. “It is against the rules,” he confided, “but I see you are interested. It is a joy to show to those who are intelligent. If Mademoiselle, Monsieur, and Madame would like to see”—he leaned close to the business-

like one's ear—"I will make an exception; but not a word in the village."

A frenzied growl and a sharp cry of pain again awakened the silent corridor. Then again the swishing, clanking chains and a moan of despair. The businesslike one snapped out his watch in the half-light and grunted. The mother nodded in timid assent. The girl said breathlessly, "Oh! if we *could* see them!" While the stranger, still bringing up the rear, a position he had throughout Monsieur Pivot's lecture quietly maintained, said nothing. In turn the daughter, mother, and father peered on tip-toe into the gloom beyond the grated shutter. The stranger held back, while he overheard Monsieur Pivot explaining as he led on down the stairs:

"It is one's duty, Madame, to imprison such vermin as they. They are Leroux, Tête Rouge, and Varino, the famous bandits. Madame evidently has heard—they have terrorized our region for years, by murder, Madame, by pillage."

"And you are not afraid?" exclaimed the mother as the daughter successfully explained.

Monsieur Pivot again shrugged his shoulders.

"Mon Dieu!" he sighed, "one must do one's duty. I am a soldier as well as a jailer, Madame. One must have the courage, one must not possess the heart of the chicken."

Through a barred window of the landing the stranger perceived that the ladies had gained the garden. Again he listened intently and overheard

Monsieur Pivot say to the businesslike one in sotto voce:

“And now that the ladies have gone—Ahem!—the boudoir cell of Mèlice d’Anjou. . . .”

The stranger stepped to the bolted door and slid back the shutter.

“Good-morning, René Jean!” he called. His voice, though pitched low, reverberated into the gloom beyond. There was a murmur of voices within, while Pussy-Paw at the sound of his own name slipped across the room to the drawn shutter with the swiftness of a cat. For an instant his small keen eyes peered through the grating at the stranger.

“Monsieur Raveau!” he exclaimed with a quick intake of his breath.

For the space of a few hurried moments the stranger and the poacher stood murmuring to each other through the grating.

Again the stranger’s hand went into his pocket. This time he drew forth five gold louis and passed them through the grating. Pussy-Paw seized them eagerly and passed back a bit of folded paper which the stranger opened and gravely scrutinized its contents in detail.

“Good!” said he.

He laid its contents carefully into his empty cigarette case, and as carefully snapped the clasp shut. The paper he folded and put into his portfolio. Then he closed the shutter and made his way leisurely down the stairs.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE Inn of the Cerf Noir is one of those charming hostelries that the past has bestowed upon the present day in France, and which modernity is constantly threatening to change into an hotel. That was at least the dream of its proprietress, Madame Poulet: to obliterate its snug old dining-room with its beamed-oak ceiling, and its blackened fireplace, under cheap frescoes and a self-feeding stove with nickeled ornaments; to drape its modest windows, whose small square panes wink at the passer-by, in imitation magenta velvet curtains, and have them neatly hooked back with gilded tin chains; to beautify the solid oaken sideboard with waxed plants, whose pots would be corseted in pink crêped tissue paper, secured at the waistline by a gay satin bow; to have a *fosse* built under the widest shed of the old courtyard for automobiles, and plaster with gaudy signs heralding the strongest tire, and the best of gasoline, the ancient porte-cochère whose sagging roof shelters the dining-room door, and its mate opposite, a smaller door leading to the tiny office and the winding stairs, that lead up to the ten bedrooms above. Fortunately none of these horrors which daily tempted Madame Poulet as yet existed.

The courtyard itself, with its cavernous sheds and its regiment of ducks and their goslings, quacking indignantly over nothing of importance, its chickens pecking with mincing tread under the watchful choleric eye of the rooster, all still retained their primitive simplicity.

The tall clock in the dining-room, and the one with the painted face, that had been constructed by a careful man from Tours (long since dead), still tick-tocked alternately with measured stubbornness, according to their separate ideas of time. The clean little bedrooms upstairs with their dimity-curtained windows, and their high-post bedsteads, gave out that restful and refreshing odour of having been kept well scrubbed, dusted, and wiped for generations. Even the old kitchen when you entered it seemed to impress you with the fact that it had never yet been ashamed of its cooking, any more than its neighbour, the cool wine cellar below it, was ashamed of its rare Pommard, its golden Chablis, and a certain Cognac of 1847 which had mellowed into perfume. All this did not prevent Madame Poulet, however, from squeezing in back of her small black desk in the tiny office, and perusing with solemn interest the alluring catalogues of wine companies who would have done far better had they confined themselves wholly to wholesale drugs. Madame Poulet being as round, shall we say, as that excellent cask of Cognac, breathed heavily when she read, though she had a cheery word for every one, and kept her spectacles well wiped,

and her white caps immaculately washed and ironed.

It must be said that Monsieur Pivot exaggerated when he referred to the many Americans who stopped at the Cerf Noir for the night, since it was well off the beaten track. No one was more delighted than Madame Poulet when they did. She derived in her old age—having been always well schooled in French economy—a certain excitement from the sight of other people's extravagance, and reaped her honest share of it with a smile and a feeling of righteous reward, taking as much pains to understand their bad French as she did in serving a chateaubriand smothered in mushrooms, or a sizzling platter of the best of little fishes, fresh from the yellow river, fried to a dry crisp (they always looked as if they had died dancing), and sprinkled with fine herbs by her skilful hands.

When Raveau entered the Cerf Noir that evening, the Spences, the only other guests in the inn, were at dinner. He went up to his room, lighted his candle and a cigarette, parted the white curtains of his window, and stood gazing out into the dusk at the towers of the prison, dark and grim above the trees of the silent village. His mind, however, was not upon the towers. Raveau was one of those men whose religion is nine tenths his confidence in himself. Raveau possessed a thorough knowledge of life, a phenomenal judgment of men and women, and a physical strength and calm daredevil nerve which made him afraid of

nothing. Nevertheless, those qualities did not prevent him at times from becoming a dreamer. As he stood there peering in the dusk at the towers, a strange sensation of loneliness crept over him. He stood there with his eyes half-closed; the image of Babette's fair blond head, her frank violet eyes, and the memory of her eager gentle voice had taken possession of him. Finally he drew a deep breath and his lips shut hard as he turned away from the window, tossed his cigarette into the grate, and going over to the night table by his bed, upon which his candle was burning, drew from his pocket a necklace of pearls clasped by a single ruby set in diamonds. The gold clasp beneath the ruby was of an ingenious pattern. It could be opened only by a double alternate pressure,

A smile crept to the corners of his set lips as he weighed the necklace absently in the palm of his hand, then raising them closer to the candle's flame, he examined the pearls one by one under a small magnifying glass set in hard black rubber. Then he laid the pearls out straight upon the marble top of the night table, turned them skilfully upon their backs, and bent his glass closer as one by one interested him.

"Superb the fifth and eighth, the pearls of a lady," he muttered in perfect English with scarcely a trace of accent, his keen brown eyes moving slowly from left to right along the string. "Ah!" he exclaimed softly, "filled in—but an honest fill—looks like

Gottlieb's work trying to please a big house after a warning—an easy twenty-two thousand francs if sold with any intelligence.”

He slipped the necklace back into his pocket, and, having washed his hands and face, carefully brushed his silvery gray hair. Again he returned to the night table and stood there for some moments, lost in thought, gazing fixedly at the candle flame. Again that feeling of loneliness gripped at his heart. He recalled Babette's gentle willingness when he had given her the coin and asked her to pay his taxi from Tours. Suddenly he brought his clenched fist down on the marble top of the night table and, blowing out his candle, quietly descended the stairs, and, striding across the porte-cochère, entered the dining-room with an excellent appetite.

He entered with that unassuming ease of a well-bred man and nodded a pleasant “Bon soir” to Madame Poulet, who was following the pink-cheeked maid with two dishes from the Spences' table with a warning not to serve the peas separately, since Americans cannot understand a vegetable served alone.

Raveau seated himself at a small table, unfolded his napkin, smoothed back his silver-gray hair from his temples, and picked up the menu of Madame Poulet's excellent and thoroughly wholesome little dinner, a dinner which began naturally with the hors d'œuvres (and Madame Poulet's mayonnaise was well worth lingering over), and proceeded to scan

it in Madame Poulet's handwriting down past the soup, the pike in cream, a chicken "en cocotte," the peas, and a chocolate soufflé. Madame Poulet had inscribed this appetizing prose-poem in the centre of a large card, whose coloured lithograph upon one corner depicted three pheasants flying over a laughing girl, seated on a stone wall, and lifting a glass of champagne over a hunter's head, close to the magnificent antlers of a stag behind, whose hindquarters faded away a valley of grapes and peaches in a violet haze. Raveau idly laid down this apotheosis of bounty and as idly glanced at the strangers in the corner.

The girl's eyes were red, the flush was even plainly perceptible below the fine gold rims of her spectacles. Her mother sat stiffly, grim and red beside her. Her father, leaning across the table, tapped his daughter lovingly on the arm with his big hand.

"Now," he said, "don't you think any more about it, my daughter."

"Oh! mamma!" she exclaimed in a stifled voice.

For an instant she buried her face nervously in her hands.

Raveau turned.

"Just let her alone," intervened the mother.

A sob escaped the girl.

"I ca-an't help it—mother," she stammered. "It was the one thing I really loved, and now just to think it's—it's gone forever, makes me just sick. Oh, why did we ever come to this awful place!"

Raveau pushed the hors d'œuvres gravely from him. Tempting as they were after his brisk walk in the bracing air along the river, he realized he was no longer hungry. A man who can go on eating while a woman cries must be little short of a brute.

"Don't you think any more about it," insisted the father defiantly, letting his voice rise. "I'll get you one as like it as two peas." He reached out for the Pommard and refilled his glass.

"You dear father!" she murmured, sobbing afresh.

Raveau was one of those complex natures who could coolly look into the muzzle of a revolver and talk common sense to the man who held it on him. He had proved this once in Havre, again, several years before, in the compartment of a train leaving Monte Carlo. To listen to a girl sobbing took more nerve, however, than he possessed. Her attempt even to stifle her sobs became torture to him. He shifted nervously in his seat and a lump came in his throat.

The father leaned over and tapped his daughter on the arm again.

"Don't worry!" he coaxed soothingly.

"Don't you think we'd better ask again?" ventured the mother weakly.

The man grew suddenly red. "*Ask!* Did I ever ask for anything I ever got in this country?"

"Now, don't be intolerant—most likely she dropped it in Tours," intervened the mother. "Can't you remember, daughter? As I told your father, you *do* leave things so around. I'm not, of course, saying

that you did—I'm only saying—well! if she didn't have a father like you."

The father sat back in his plain chair, touched by his wife's compliment, a chair which was much too small for him, and a slow, grateful smile settled over his rugged honest face.

It was the face of this man that Raveau had been intently studying—the face of a man battling with a considerable loss and a heartbroken daughter. He saw what it meant to him—more than this, he saw what was passing in the father's mind—the renewal, and at a price, despite his generosity, which it was evident he could ill afford. Again his alert brown eyes reverted discreetly to the daughter. Had she been supremely beautiful and indignant over her loss, he would have helped himself to the pike with a shrug. All things come to the beautiful as easily as new toys to a spoiled child. He realized how pitifully homely she was. He saw that it was the master-hand who had cut her tailor-made, soap and water and the careful training of a select girls' school that had made her even presentable. She could have gone anywhere unattended, unharmed.

He sat now toying with two peas between the prongs of his fork. They were small peas, and about the size of the ones terminating the string he had so carefully examined upstairs. A moment later he rose, crushed his napkin close to his empty glass, and with a low bow of apology at his intervention, approached the table. The father, suddenly recognizing the

silent stranger of the morning, shot him a flustered glance, and, smiling, rose up awkwardly out of his chair. As Raveau drew before them, he inclined his head to the three.

Instantly the father's genial American spirit, devoid of formality, got the better of him, and he came forward and blurted out, referring to the prison:

"Quite an interestin' old place, wasn't it? My wife and daughter. You speak English, of course?"

"A leetle," returned Raveau, smiling.

He laid one hand on the father's arm, and with the other hand presented the string of pearls graciously to the daughter.

"I haf not made zee mistake, Mademoiselle," said he pleasantly with conviction. "It was zen *you*, Mademoiselle, who lost it as you were taking zee leave of zee old prison so picturesque—so horrible!"

There came a sudden gasp of relief from the mother.

"Forgive me, zat I present myself. I learn by your conversation."

The girl, half-dazed with joy, held forth her hand, the necklace within it, and gripped the stranger's own.

"Oh, thank you!" she managed to say. For a moment the mother said nothing, her colour coming and going by turns. Finally she stammered:

"Don't you think you'd better ask this gentleman to sit down?"

"Forgive me," pleaded Raveau, "my excuses. I am still at zee little dinner so excellent."

"But, you'll have a cigar!" begged the father.

"I do not smoke—now and zen a cigarette—zat is all," smiled Raveau with a shrug of apology. "It is indeed zee pure luck zat I find it, Mademoiselle, since zere is what you say, many soft muds near zee entrance."

The father again rose to his feet and shook Raveau's hand heartily, and with a low bow Raveau left them and regained his seat at table.

Raveau lied. He had taken it deftly from her neck in the pitch darkness of the dungeon where the four holy fathers were confined.

The morning dawned, sparkling in sunshine—a day even rarer than the day before. The gutters in the quaint old street upon which the Cerf Noir stood danced in flashing ripples from the generous overflow of the town pump in the public square, jammed this fair morning with market carts, the crisp air pungent with the tang of fresh carrots, cabbages, and artichokes. Below, the river swung on merrily, careful of its banks.

It is perfectly true that a village awakens a trifle earlier upon a bright morning. Shopkeepers get down their shutters with a will. The gayety with which good weather affects a village is infectious. The apoplectic wine merchant greets his political rival with a hearty:

"How goes it, my old one?"

The grocer hails his debtor from across the street with a wave of his hand—often crossing to inquire

after his sick wife. “. . . and the little ones?” Young girls cease to be sad when they think of their sweethearts. The children go singing to school. Bells ring clearer. Cats begin to have more confidence in dogs. Even dogs, who in the raw drizzling rain have stopped to growl against the wrinkled noses of other dogs, whom they have long detested, now trot by their worst enemies without a sign of recognition. Nothing so rinses the mind as a change from “Wind and Rain” to “Very Fine”; we are all barometers. The “blues” indicate a depression of the needle. A whiff of tingling air a burst of sunshine, and we are on our feet again.

As early as seven Raveau breakfasted in his room with the conscience of a man having done a good deed. True, he had thrown away twenty-two thousand francs! Few men in his profession but would have ridiculed him for his soft-hearted generosity over the distress of a homely girl. He fairly grinned as he tapped through the shell of his boiled egg. There was something to him akin to comic in the whole little comedy, irresistible, working as he did under the absolute confidence of those about him, including Monsieur Pivot, and in the pitch darkness of the dungeon nothing would have been easier had it not been for the complex clasp—whose secret he had to divine almost simultaneously as he touched it. There is such a thing as virtuosity in all things skilfully done. To have bungled would have meant failure, an apology, even discovery.

"When you seize a viper by the head, see that you do not miss," was a saying of an old professor of his, now dead—a man whom he revered for his fondness for children and his skill in getting at a difficult pocketbook. Raveau had been skilful enough to relieve the daughter of her pearls without as much as her being aware of his touch. There is scarcely a pickpocket in Paris but would have envied him his skill, and ordinary pocket-picking he had never gone seriously into since his youth. He considered it the mediocre work of a petty thief. There was nothing petty about Raveau—he dealt in large affairs.

As he helped himself to a second cup of Madame Poulet's coffee, his mind reverted to the Spences—the father's honest thankfulness, the relief of the mother, the joy of the girl. "To be as homely as that," he thought to himself; "poor child." He lighted a cigarette and fell again to dreaming of Babette. Had it been, after all, the memory of Babette that had prompted his heart to give back the necklace? It is quite possible. Love turns professional evildoing into a distasteful labour. Finally he shook himself out of his reverie, had his tub, shaved, and dressed himself with his habitual care (a care which had never deserted him even in prison), and, unstrapping a square sketch-box, lifted a zinc lid within, and extracted from a handful of half-squeezed oil colour tubes a small bottle containing a pale amber-coloured liquid. He seated himself at

the round mahogany table upon which he had breakfasted, and using his own letter paper and pen, dipped the latter in the liquid, and printed the following note in English—in letters which vanished as soon as they were dry. There was no formal heading. The note began simply with:

“Sending enclosed what you asked for. I doubt if you find what you expect. There is nothing left here but a small château job full of risk, and in my opinion, with but little return. However, my friends, that is your affair. The weather seems at last stationary—excellent working nights. The ‘Cat’ demands nothing more than I gave him. He might be useful elsewhere, as he is skilful. I had occasion to use him a year ago and found him honest, although I have not much confidence in country stock. The mentality is lacking.”

Nothing appeared on the sheet now but the final I N G and the I was rapidly fading. Raveau lighted his candle and warmed the sheet over the flame. The printed page flashed up in black letters as rapidly as a negative under a quick developer. It cooled into a blank page again as he folded it, enclosing the scrap of paper Pussy-Paw had given him. In an empty match-box he placed in cotton the wax impressions of the keyholes of the two doors. The note he sealed in a violet-tinted and highly scented envelope, and addressed it in a feminine hand to:

G. L. 16 Poste Restante,
Mantes,
Seine et Oise.

The package he addressed, also in a feminine hand, but totally unrecognizable from the other, to:

V-C. T. 64. Poste Restante,
Marseilles.

He had barely finished blotting the two addresses when the growling wrench of the Americans' automobile announced to him their departure. He went to the window and peered out. They were all happy down there, even the chauffeur whom the red-cheeked little maid managed to exchange a final whispered word to, over her armful of wraps. He saw the father lift his leghorn hat to Madame Poulet, and give an extra tuck to the rug under the girl's knees.

Raveau put on his dressing-gown and leaned out.

"Bon voyage!" he called down to them.

The father caught sight of him.

"Won't you come along?" he yelled up.

Raveau shook his head, smiling.

"I haf not zee costume," he laughed back to them, with a helpless shrug.

The chauffeur cranked and sprang to his seat.

"Ah! Mon Dieu!" exclaimed Raveau, tapping his forehead with his knuckles. "One moment!" He feigned to slip back in his room. The letter and the package were, however, in the pocket of his dressing-gown. "It is zat I have always zee bad memory," he continued, as he reappeared. "My cousin she gave me zeese to mail, and I had not mails

zem. Would you mind en route, at Tours, or Orleans, whichever you pass, zee mails are so uncer-tain in zis leetle village."

"Throw them down!" roared Spence genially.

"A thousand thanks," smiled Raveau, as he dropped both into the father's uplifted hands.

The girl waved her fingers to the open window above.

Raveau waved.

They waved again.

A choking cough from the exhaust, and they were gone.

"One hand washes the other," mused Raveau, as he turned thoughtfully away from the window with the vestige of a smile.

CHAPTER FIVE


ALL these passing incidents which had intervened between Raveau's first sight of Babette in the prison garden the day before, his interview with the "Cat," his generosity apropos of the Spence necklace, and their departure as unconscious participants in crime, now vanished from his mind. The night at the Cerf Noir, alone as he was, had passed more agreeably than he had expected, and the morning had opened with a little comedy which he was still smiling over.

"What is important in life," he had been known to declare, "is not to be bored."

Gradually he grew serious. This man who lived by his sinister skill and his wits fell again to dreaming. The truth was, that for the first time in all his erring life, Jacques Baptiste Raveau was in love, and like a man who questions an undeniable fact, knowing the fact to be undeniable, like everything he set out to achieve, it had become second nature with him to study carefully his ground before making even a preliminary move. This had been his method in the bank robbery at Nice, which he had, unknown to the police, more than one finger in. He made an exhaustive study of the whole situation before he

went to work, and a detailed consideration of the chances of escape. He was successful. Life to him had long been a game of chess at which his most formidable opponent, the law, like a skilful antagonist sitting opposite him, kept him constantly on his guard. When he wrote a letter he bolted the door. When he entered a room he took in all it contained at a glance. When he went among people at large he did so with his most attractive manner, and a thin blued steel revolver in his pocket. He had beaten the law time and time again. He had even given it a handicap and beaten it, so often, in fact, that among his enemies—those gentlemen who are everywhere and nowhere, who are here to-day and gone to-morrow, who pass at times for unassuming travellers, affable drummers, respectable merchants on vacation, occasionally in mourning, adapting themselves to any occasion and to any one, always hunting for two friends and a stranger, and in whose pocket lies within easy grip a pair of handcuffs as well as the revolver—had known Raveau for years (alias Vinton, alias Veauton, alias Ravin) and harboured a certain professional respect for his elusiveness.

Only a few of these gentlemen had distinguished themselves by putting Raveau away for a time. It is surprising that so noted a criminal had only served out two light sentences, both for forgery. He had gone scot-free for taking ninety-five thousand francs in French bank-notes from the pocket of a Brazilian



gambler on the express to Biarritz. He did it with his ring, slitting the man's pocket from the outside, and getting his portfolio as he reached up to take down his valise from the rack above his seat. Raveau never gambled; he detested it, as one detests the game of a fool. Folded inside the ring—a heavy gold crest ring—was a thin curved blade as sharp as a surgeon's lancet, an ingenious invention of his own. He aided the Brazilian in getting down his valise, which was of heavy English pigskin and well jammed in the rack. Raveau shook his chance acquaintance pleasantly by the hand and left the train at the station before the famous watering place. He reasoned that the Brazilian would have lost it on the gaming table. He was sorry to have spoiled his week's pleasure, as gambling to the gentleman in question was as important as wine and women.

The game he was absorbed in now, the honest winning of the heart of a girl, baffled him to the point where he paced the floor, a game which, by its sheer newness, frightened him; for, frankly, he was afraid of losing. He had duped others by the dozens. It must be said to his credit that he had no intention of duping Babette; he was in earnest. Strange, is it not, that love is so closely allied to religion; that true love is only another synonym for sincerity. The boy runs to his best friend to tell his troubles, the man soliloquizes with himself, trusting no one; few men were as alone in the world as Raveau. It was the price he paid for a profession which had always fas-

minated him. He paced the floor past the round table, stopping at intervals to gaze again out of the window in the direction of the prison. He realized that to honestly open the heart of a young girl as pure and as innocent as Babette could be fraught with more difficulty than opening a safe. A new light had dawned within his heart, and Raveau had a heart. It was his one weakness, a light that for the first time laid bare the inexcusable evil within him. A criminal of Raveau's type is a slave to the excitement of crime, just as one becomes a slave to the sensation of a drug. No moment in his whole life had been so tense with excitement as when he robbed the mail-car single-handed and at full speed shortly after it left Bucarest en route to Budapest. After the job was over he knelt down in a wood just as dawn was breaking and gave thanks that he had not taken a human life. He had a strong belief in piety and often went to church to pray. He had dominated the mail clerk at a moment when he was the sole occupant of the car with two words in Chec signifying: "Hands up!"


The man neither moved nor spoke until the man with the mask had gone. The papers were full of it. Raveau read them in two languages at a reputable hotel near Prague, where he passed for an English professor in modest circumstances, suffering from sciatica.

But to Babette—Babette, whom his mind was full of. There was a grain of fine sentiment in Raveau.

He who knew women as well as his pocket, knew Babette's worth. Most of the women he had known and had tried to love had known as much of the world as he. They spoke the same language as he. Things between them were understood in curt sentences, often by a jerk of the head, or a muttered monosyllable. They were mostly a race whose main object, like that of the Brazilian gambler, was the hazard of gain. Many of these Raveau had known for years. He knew the exact hour any of them could be found in the bars and cafés they frequented in Paris, in Nice, in Monte Carlo, and beyond. He often helped them when they were ill or hungry. His charm and his kindness won him their respect, if not their love. Love had been long dead within them. It had become only a memory of the past, this poor little Cupid who had been always in frail health with them, and who they were finally forced to bury, as they had buried their own children, as they had buried most of their friends, their reputation, which succumbed slowly like their beauty. It was the price *they* paid for the game they loved, in which, like that everlasting hope of the gambler, they felt that somehow, some day, some hour, love would come back to them again. A few had managed at last to marry happily—oh! so few!—but actually a few. They had by some princely gesture of the loving hand of Providence been given love and a fireside, and peace and rest. They were no longer forced to sit up all night in smoke and raillery. Keen

to live, but fearing to offend, smiling when they wept within them, worried over the rent, their debts, the price of the latest fashions, their fading beauty, their health, and the subtle vengeance of a hundred and one by-gones, any of which at any moment might appear to sweep away the little they had gained by their indomitable will and their patient bravery. The courage of men is naught in comparison to the bravery of women.

Babette knew nothing. Her appetite was excellent, and she was sometimes happy and sometimes sad, rarely knowing the real reason for either. She had never been even to Tours, and only as far as Paris in novels. Now that Raveau thought seriously of all this, a slow idea developed in his keen brain to change his life, an idea that developed, as he walked incessantly between the window and his door, into a determination to give up "jobs" that tempted him and live honestly by his painting. For years he had lived dishonestly by it. He had long ago become an expert in imitating two old masters of the Dutch School. These small canvases, sold as authentic preliminary studies for the well-known large canvases, Raveau sold to a dealer in Paris for two hundred francs apiece, the dealer in question selling them at prices varying from two to four thousand francs. Raveau did these when he was hard up. At the present moment he had plenty upon him. Finally he picked up his stick and hat, and, descending the stairs, strolled out into the warm sunlight of the



village. He skirted the busy market-place, and ascended the cobbled hill-street which led up to the summit of the great rock crowned by the prison.

A week passed, during which Monsieur Pivot, that garrulous and polite little man, recounted nearly all of his uneventful life he could recall to the stranger who was no longer a stranger to him but a genial companion. Sacristi! did they not have a glass together at the Cerf Noir daily at sunset, and, after, a game of manille or dominoes?—oh! for very little, barely little more than the price of the other's glass, and Raveau generally lost, so much so that Monsieur Pivot grew proud of his ability as a player, and for two days insisted on calling an armistice that he might teach his opponent the mysteries of manille.

To-day he sat in the Cerf Noir recounting to Raveau the poverty of his childhood, his military service, the strictness of his father, the forgiving qualities of his mother, who had been a good mother to seven children, four girls and three sons. He recalled the love he had borne for Madame Pivot—his grief at her death.

"Ah! *that*, my friend." His eyes filled and he brightened bravely, as he lapsed into his feeling of pride and gratitude he bore toward his country for electing him jailer and for giving him the military medal for his service.

Ah! *that*, my friend! Again his hand touched a spot over his heart as he spoke of his wife. At the third

glass, over a winning game, he began to glorify France and damn the Prussians, and again launched forth into the history of his country, laying stress upon the special bravery and virtue of certain historical ladies imprisoned in the prison, giving brave knights their due; picking to pieces the reputations of various kings under whose reign the prison had served; and all this amusing hodge-podge out of his head, and of which, although there is no record either in heaven or upon the face of the earth, or even in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Raveau harkened to with the grave patience of a man listening to a savant. Only occasionally they mentioned Babette in passing, but brief as these occasions were, Raveau saw that her father loved her, though, like all peasants, he regarded the inevitable—her marriage—in a year or so in purely a practical light, a deal to shrewdly consider before giving his consent. The chosen young man, whoever he might be, he hoped would bring with him at least ten thousand francs. Babette's dot was modest. "Anyway, it is all that I can afford," he explained. With three thousand francs, one could start a little business. He preferred Babette, when she married, to marry a wine merchant, and to settle in the village. There was the Père Granville's house on the market-place for sale—it could be easily turned into a hotel. Yes, that was his idea. First the wine store, which by degrees would grow into a hotel—not that he had anything against Madame Poulet. On the contrary, they were, indeed, second

cousins and, besides, "she was a brave woman—Raveau rattled the dominoes into their box. He had lost. He ran his fine hand through his silver-gray hair, and bent his handsome face nearer his interlocutor, whose eyes had grown strangely bright, Raveau having insisted on a thimbleful from the little cask of Cognac.

"Listen!" continued Monsieur Pivot, stopping a hiccough with the flat of his hand. "If I"—he lowered his voice, Madame Poulet busying herself at that moment putting away the spoons within ear-shot in a noisy drawer—"if I had a hotel, I should make people comfortable. I should have a good fish for strangers. For example, these English and American ladies and gentlemen, they do not eat the same food. They eat dishes of their own country. What they are I do not know—but I should find out—do you understand? A good dish that pleases, that is the idea—a good bed—an excellent bottle—et voilà!"

Monsieur Pivot cleared his throat.

"Then there is the question of the automobile," he went on, with a sweeping gesture in the direction of the courtyard. "I should abolish all those vermin of *volaille*," he continued, referring to the ducks and chickens with importance, "and have the court paved in cement. When one's horse is well stabled one does not grumble."

Monsieur Pivot paused, tucking his feet under the rungs of his chair and rubbing his hands.

Raveau leaned back from his glass.

"I see," said he intently.

"The strangers being contented," continued Monsieur Pivot earnestly, "and knowing my son-in-law was their proprietor, they would come to the prison more as—more as with the family, knowing I would show them everything. Do you understand? I need not tell you that my own benefit would increase enormously. Ah! my friend! you do not know them when they are contented; they give gold."

"You think, with thirteen—say fifteen thousand francs," interposed Raveau slowly, "that the Père Granville's place might be made practical—as a start?"

"Sapristi! I am certain," exclaimed Monsieur Pivot, draining his glass. "Ah! you do not know how easily it could be done. For instance, there is Monsieur Freluchet's café, on the corner. He began with the little wineshop in the rue Jeanne d'Arc. He did not have a sou when he began. En bien! to-day he is rich—he is rich," and he said it nonchalantly as he had referred to the oubliette.

"But I *do* know," returned Raveau. He leaned forward and laughed softly.

"No! no! my good Pivot, few know better than I. My own brother and I have had for nearly ten years an excellent wine business in Bordeaux. We sell largely to Paris. There are also two excellent small hotels along the Mediterranean. One belongs to my brother, the other is mine, the one at St. Raphael.

My brother's is at Cannes. We have between us also a small brasserie with a café concert adjoining in Toulon, an excellent affair when you consider that it nets us close to fifty thousand francs a year."

Monsieur Pivot's eyes had already opened wide. He leaned back in his chair with a perplexed smile of astonishment.

"I have long wanted to marry," Raveau added simply, and paused—a pause during which neither for a moment spoke. The peculiar, keen, honest gleam in Raveau's eyes said far more to the swarthy little man opposite him than if he had spoken.

Monsieur Pivot gazed for an instant into the half-open box of dominoes. Then again he looked up at Raveau and his smile widened until it wrinkled the corners of his eyes.

"Sacred name of a dog!" he cried, joyfully slamming his clenched nervous little fist down on the marble-topped table. "Madame Poulet!" he shouted, half springing from his seat. "Madame Poulet! another glass—another glass! Ah! name of a dog!"

CHAPTER SIX

LOVE may be likened to an accident. It often happens like a flash. There is such a thing as love at first sight: all other glances that may have been exchanged in the life of a young girl can never replace that first glance, which leaves her heart troubled, and her mind wavering between happiness and melancholy.

Babette knew nothing of life, and far less of love. She had blushed when the stranger for the first time had entered the garden; she did not know why—possibly it was the gracious, kindly way in which he had spoken to her. It might have been simply because he was exceedingly handsome and looked into her eyes with a certain keen gentleness. She could recall only vaguely his voice—that his eyes were very dark, whereas they were brown, that his teeth were very white, and that he seemed happy, for he smiled. She had felt herself drawn irresistibly to the window of her father's bedroom to watch the stranger as he passed out through the garden with Monsieur Pivot after the Americans had left. Monsieur Pivot had gone out with Raveau to the gate, and had stood for all of a quarter of an hour talking over the chances of a spell of good weather. Babette left the window and

stood leaning listlessly against the open doorway of the whitewashed antechamber; although both her father and the stranger were out of view, she caught snatches of their conversation. Monsieur Pivot was boasting of his confidence in the wind, since it had chosen to swing to the northeast, "where," he declared, "it would decide to remain for days of good weather."

Babette, who had been sewing, started to nervously re-thread her needle, but pinned it over her breast, and fell again to listening. She felt less nervous and relieved when she finally heard the stranger exclaim:

"Ah! I must be going. Thank you, Monsieur, for your welcome and for the things so interesting you have been amiable enough to show me."

"It is nothing!" laughed Monsieur Pivot.

"It will not inconvenience you, then, should I make a little sketch of the garden?"

"On the contrary, Monsieur," assured her father, "I should be enchanted."

Then ensued an exchange of "*Au revoirs*."

"You know the road?" shouted her father after a moment's silence. "Take the first turn into the market-place as you reach the bottom of the hill; it is shorter than if you make the big turn past the mayor's."

"Thank you again, Monsieur," came the voice of the stranger faintly. Her father reëntered the gate, and, closing it, went back through the garden to free his prisoners.


As the Cat, the carter, and Barbouche passed through the garden, Babette turned back into her bedroom; she felt, strangely enough, that she wished to avoid having to greet them with a "good-morning" as they passed. By this time the stranger, she pictured to herself, was halfway to the village. Would he return? The thought was not pleasant, since her heart beat with a peculiar fear; she gave a sigh and a brave little toss of her head, and started to wash the coffee bowls in the antechamber. She tried to sing as her plump hands went into the warm suds and water. Suddenly a tear started, rolled to the corner of her rosy mouth, and dropped close to the needle pinned on her breast. She was sorry she had not thought to put on her new bodice that morning, which she had washed and ironed the day before. At this moment Monsieur Pivot found her crying softly to herself over the steaming dishpan.

"Eh bien!" he exclaimed, "what has happened?"

Not knowing exactly what had happened, Babette did not reply, neither did she yield her cheek as he kissed her. There is some stubbornness in tears.

"There! There!" declared her father, "you are nervous. Ah! mon Dieu! girls are all alike! You are not ill? Eh, my little wolf?"

Babette shook her blond head, still gazing into the warm suds. After her father had gone she went into her bedroom, dried her eyes on her apron and, not knowing why, stood peering wistfully out of her window, which commanded a short view of the road



down to the village. Presently she sat upon her bed and picked up the work she had been reading during the visit of the strangers. Had the Mère Truchard been late with the milk that morning it would have been heated quickly had not Babette fell to day-dreaming over her stockings and the following absorbing scene:

“‘And so you give me no hope, Mademoiselle?’” Babette continued to read, tucking her finger eagerly under the following page.

“‘None, Monsieur,’ returned the young princess defiantly, with that courage born of a *gasconne*; at the renewed thud of pikes upon the outer door of her chamber, she made to swoon.

“Guy de Bourgoin strode past the half-fainting damsel.

“‘Peace be with thee, lady,’ he breathed, and slipping out his rapier, stood ready.

“‘Enter, swine!’ he cried, and his voice rang clear. ‘Thou art welcome. ’Tis not the first time my blade hath been greased with the fat of poltroons. God, grant ’twere night, that I might give thee fairer play——’”

“Babette!”

She started and snapped shut the book.

“Yes, father.”

“The wretch—ah, mon Dieu! Where is it?” he thundered.

“It is on the shelf in the cupboard,” returned Babette. “It was you who put it there.”

"Run, then," said her father, "and make haste to give it to Monsieur Barbouche. He needs it for the pump."

Babette blushed less now when Raveau entered the gate; she regarded him more as a friend of her father's, and he came daily, as early as eight-thirty in the morning, with his sketch trap and his good humour. And then Babette would bring the three-legged stool from her bedroom for him to sit upon, for his own sketching stool was then in the hands of the village cobbler, under repair. The day its new leather seat was finished, nailed with new brass nails to its folding halves, Babette went herself down to the village to fetch it. Raveau was painting the garden with its vista of the cavernous "Church" and the great towers. The prison was empty of prisoners, and only now and then a visitor entered to be shown the dungeons. Thus the three had the silent, sinister old place to themselves. It was her delight to sit beside him and watch him paint. The surety and rapidity with which he drew, his skill with his brush, the magic formation in colour of the scene that lay before him, left her in a sort of fascinated awe.

"It is wonderful to be able to 'photograph' like that," she said to herself every little while, and often to him over his shoulder, for the word "photograph" was the only one in her limited artistic vocabulary which expressed it. Everything is a "photograph" to the peasant. Paintings are only coloured ones.

As the sketch neared its completion, her eager pride and excitement was a delight for Raveau to watch. She took especial pride in washing his brushes now, which she kept in her little room, soaking in turpentine, in a green jug, which he had purchased in the market-place. His sketch trap, too, she kept under her cot, neatly covered with a clean towel. Even her father was not allowed to touch it. He did not attempt to. Monsieur Pivot was content: he saw before him a new future, an hotel, a son-in-law, some grandchildren—and considerable happiness.

Babette no longer overslept, but rose with the sun. Had the little apartment tucked under the great tower been clean before it fairly shone now. One day she bought a pale blue ribbon which found a nestling place in her fair hair—a turquoise set in gold.

"It is adorable, your ribbon, Mademoiselle," Raveau remarked, turning as he worked.

"You find it so, Monsieur?" she managed to say, and a moment later felt like crying.

There were evenings when he came to play piquet with her father in the antechamber under the glow of the lamp, whose shade depicted a snow scene. Whenever he did not—often when she was left alone, both Monsieur Pivot and Raveau having gone down to the village—she dreamed over her book. Somehow the story had lost its flavour; she, too, felt like a prisoner, although her father came home early. At the sound of his key grating in the lock of the heavy gate she gave a little sigh of content. I have said it

took a stout heart to remain in the prison alone. Babette, however, was not afraid; she had been born there. She was thinking only of the long night before dawn, and dawn to her meant Monsieur Raveau's presence, and yet not one word of the compact between her father and her at the Cerf Noir had yet reached her dear little ears.

They spent their afternoons together now, upon the top of the great rock, where Babette had played when a child, her eyes gazing wistfully at the red-tiled roofs of the village below, as he told her of the world that lay beyond, and which she knew nothing of. He told her in a tenderly, fatherly way, for Raveau knew the world so well that he told her nothing of its evil—only of its light and happiness.

The air was very still this afternoon, and the river far below them lay in a golden haze, for the sun was setting. Already the great towers cast a cool shadow over them, and the two moved farther down the rock where the grass was soft and green—a little open space, hedged by a thicket out of which fluttered a little bird and his mate at their approach.

"And Paris?" she questioned him softly, looking straight into his eyes, like a child demanding an explanation. "It is big, is it not—Paris?"

"Big and gay and—lonely," he answered, half to himself. "You shall see," he added, turning again to meet her gentle, questioning eyes. "As soon as I get back to Paris I am going to send you some pic-

tures of it. You see," he laughed, "I must be going Thursday, Mademoiselle."

She looked at him for a long moment—blankly, and a sudden terror came into her eyes.

Raveau shrugged his shoulders, and plucked out a blade of grass close to her small stockinged foot, that had slipped free of its sabot.

"What will you?" he added helplessly. "There is my brother—he is coming from Bordeaux to meet me. We must then go on a long voyage to Corsica, to buy wine."

The corners of her rosy mouth twitched. She breathed heavily, and grew a little pale.

"Ah, yes, indeed, it is sad to go, but that is life, Mademoiselle. It is all made up of meetings and good-byes."

She did not speak—just looked at him mute and dumbly, as if he had struck her across the face and she dared not move or cry out.

"But, Mademoiselle!" he exclaimed, feigning sudden surprise. "You are sad! What have I said? Forgive me! Ah, mon Dieu! Am I not thoughtless? It is my own sadness that makes you sad. My life is so lonely at times, I am selfish enough to thrust its loneliness upon others. Forgive me—you will forgive me—forgive me," he repeated half audibly. He sought her hands, which lay heavy and damp in her lap, and taking one in his own pressed it tenderly.

"I, too—am—am lonely," she confessed, and felt

his breath upon her cheek. "I have been lonely all my life," she stammered on bravely, conscious that her hand still lay warm in his own. "In—in winter it is worse."

"I know," he mused like a man in a dream; "we are all prisoners."

They ceased speaking.

A crow went winging over them, croaking ominously.

Raveau turned slowly toward Babette.

"Thursday I shall again be a prisoner in this wide world—and you, dear child!"

Two tears welled up in her eyes. Slowly he took her in his arms. Her fair little head sank helplessly upon his breast.

"Babette!" he murmured.

She was crying, crying bitterly.

"You believe me? Look at me! You believe me, dear—that I love you—that I love you?" He drew her soft, warm little mouth to his own.

"I, too, love you," she breathed against his lips. "I have loved you ever—ever since that first morning."

For a long while he held her in his arms—so long that the shadow of the great cold towers again crept over them. He held her gently. She had ceased to cry, to tremble, to think.

Finally he said slowly: "I am going away, Babette," and caught again the sudden startled terror in her eyes. "Babette!" he pleaded. "Will you come with me? Out into the world?"

Her breath came quick, and yet young as she was she hesitated before answering.

"Babette! will you?"

"Is it for the good reason (*pour le bon motif*)," she whispered, "that you ask me?"

"I swear by the head of my mother it is for the good reason. I ask you to be my wife."

He felt her tremble, and saw the tears start beneath her lowered lashes.

"Babette," he murmured, "it is because I believe in you, because I love you—I love you—I love you—will you—will you?" he insisted.

"Yes," she breathed faintly.

For a long moment she lay still in his arms, with half-closed eyes, her cheeks burning, her young heart beating strong against his own.

He was the first to break their silence.

"You are happy?" he asked. "Tell me you are happy, you whom I love."

Her firm young arm went about his neck, and she drew his head to her breast.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IN THE fast-thickening twilight the two little birds whom the lovers had disturbed returned to the open place in the thicket. From the tops of the great towers this hidden retreat of Raveau and Babette resembled a nest lined with green velvet, the sides of the nest being thickly woven with vines and brambles. It could be entered easily, however, by the vestige of a forgotten path—a by-way for nervous rabbits and sleek hares. The dew had already drenched the lush grass. Now and then a twig that the lovers had bent aside in their exit snapped back into place. The two little birds, who were also in love with each other, naturally resented Raveau and Babette's intrusion; they chattered to each other about it. Twilight resolved itself into dusk, and there wafted up from the river's bank a pungent perfume, the scent of burning brush. Dogs began to bark down in the village, sharp, bullying, quarrelsome barking, the last word of the big dog of the butcher, a retort decisive to the nervous little dog of the quiet old spinster who made corsets next to the Cerf Noir. A bright green snake, with jewels of eyes, slided his way through the drenched grass, and the little birds, alert and watching on the

lower twig of a bramble, fluttered up to the safer branch of a wild cherry, where they sat side by side, puffed up and preening their breasts with their tiny bills. It grew darker and so still that the clattering rap of an oar, thrown in a rowboat below on the river, reached the top of the rock. Here and there a light gleamed from a window down in the village. The lights of the well-to-do first, of those in more modest circumstances, by that inborn sense of French economy, later. To spare the candle means often to save a sou. Bats zigzagged noiselessly over the thicket, seeking their insects. It was nearly dark when a late crow, with a ragged wing, flew croaking overhead to his home in the "tower."

Suddenly, at the edge of the thicket, a hare, caught in a snare of fine brass wire, screamed like a child, and a lean hand reached out through the brambles and gripped it, striking it across the neck back of the ears, killing it. The hand slid the warm body of the hare into the big inside pocket of a weather-stained coat.

It was the "Cat"—René Jean the poacher. Who else but he could have lain so still? Neither the snake nor the little birds, who were very small and brown and had yellow bills, had been aware of his presence.

The "Cat" had lain hidden in the thicket watching the entire love scene between Raveau and Babette. He, too, had been forced to move down with the lengthening shadows noiselessly, without breaking a twig. With the same skill he had crept closer and

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closer to the lovers, until he lay within earshot in the brambles, his keen eyes peering through the tangle; neither a word nor a gesture had escaped him, and as he watched he realized the whole truth. He realized it with that dumb resignation with which he often went to jail, for he had long harboured in his sly heart a fascination for Babette—at first because she was the prettiest girl in the village, or in any other village that he knew of, and he knew many. Chance glimpses of her, when she brought the coffee, or nodded a pleasant “*bon jour*” to him in passing, during the rare times that Monsieur Pivot had him under his roof, only enhanced his fascination. This fascination had, however, sobered into respect (it often does); when, as he lay there, Babette had at last crept into Raveau’s arms, a flush of dull jealousy leaped within him. He felt the torture of their happiness, yet he dared not move, for he feared the man who had given him five gold louis, and he feared Babette, as an outcast fears innocence, knowing how wide is the gulf between them. Even when they were gone he did not move, save to reset the snare for the hare, and it was this particular hare, which he had noticed at dusk the evening before and decided to get, which had brought him to the thicket. For a long time he turned over in his mind all that he had seen and heard. Finally he stirred himself and plucked out the wooden picket of his snare.

“It is not every day a rogue can marry an angel,” he muttered to himself, getting to his damp knees.

Raveau being somewhat of his own kind, the Cat's honour among thieves was touched, yet he hesitated whether or not to denounce him to her father. Since there happens to be some good in everybody, even the worst in life, thus there was some good in the "Cat," and his respect for the daughter of his jailer weighed upon his mind. He had become a past master in the art of poaching, just as Raveau had become an expert criminal, but he knew Raveau to be the greater, the stronger. He feared him.

Now whether it was that the "Cat's" honour among thieves, or his fear of Raveau, the first thought of the poacher during his sullen flash of jealousy (though he realized how hopeless his chance was of ever winning Babette for himself) had been to pour into Monsieur Pivot's ear all that he had seen and heard, to tell him the truth about Raveau, and save Babette from marrying a rogue. His respect for Babette and his favourite jailer both prompted him to go to Monsieur Pivot that very night, for there is no gainsaying that he regarded her father as an old friend. This touch of honesty on the "Cat's" part would have been noble enough had it continued. It was, however, of short duration, for no sooner had he slipped out of his ambush in the thicket, and was on his way down past the village, his crafty brain still alive with the stirring events of the evening, than he began rapidly to weaken in his decision. He began to turn over shrewdly in his mind what Raveau meant to him: a giver of gold for

a job he would be glad enough to repeat at any time the gentleman might need him. He finally decided to hold his tongue. As he neared the village he avoided it and the highroad by continuing along a cow-path that brought him out behind the market-place, and gave him a green lane beyond, which he often used to gain the broad high plateau flanking the river. Two kilometres below, at the very end of this plateau, well hidden in a wood, lay an abandoned limestone quarry. The "Cat" went along swiftly; he was nearing home.

He entered the wood by the vestige of a trail so winding, narrow, and half obliterated that few men could have followed it even in daylight. He felt his way nimbly along its course with the surety of a nocturnal animal, turning now to the right, now to the left, as it led him on to the cavernous old quarry—a sort of ghostly crater, for its walls showed white in a luminous mist under the soft light of the stars. At the bottom of the crater, in a snug limestone cave that boasted of a stout door—for it once served to store the quarry's tools in—lived a man, a dog, and a girl.

Those who are honest in life, open and above-board, seek the open places. Those whose whole life is spent in avoiding good, in order to live safely hand-in-glove with evil, often choose, like the three animals I have mentioned at the bottom of the quarry, a hole in the ground. Both the hole and themselves belonged to the under world. Out of this hole tonight gleamed a light from a lantern. The three who

lived within were waiting up for the "Cat." As the poacher picked his way down the steep sides of the quarry, he stopped to give a low whistle. The door of the cave was shoved open, and the short figure of an old man emerged in the starlight, followed by a tall, slim girl, with as vague a parentage as the growling dog at her bare heels. The group stood there, waiting in silence for the "Cat," who strode toward them over the hummocks and weeds at the bottom of the quarry. The only greeting as the "Cat" came up to them, further than a grunted "Eh, bien!" from the old man, and a tail wag of recognition from the dog, who was as heavy as a wolf and as grizzled as the old man, was a genial oath of welcome from the girl as she drew her slim brown arm across her wanton mouth to dry her lips from the drink she had been sharing with the old man. Then the three, followed by the dog, entered the cave and drew shut the door.

Any one in passing at that moment who had stopped to listen might have heard the shrill laughter of the girl—a laugh that was defiant and free, then the deep guttural voice of the old man, and the sharp laugh of the "Cat" as he drew out the dead hare from his pocket, threw it on the table of rough boards, reached into his coat again, and with the grin of a magician, pulled out a litre of Cognac which he had filched that afternoon in passing the village grocery. Two empty kegs that had once contained blasting powder for the quarry served as chairs; a third, upon

which the girl was seated, was more pretentious, since a back of staves had been nailed to it. The interior of the cave itself, which was low ceiled and nearly square, had been neatly hewn out from the solid limestone, the end deep in shadow, opposite the door, being spanned by a bed of brushwood, known as "braize," and over which lay, tumbled, two quilts and an army blanket, with the number of the regiment burned out. Along the limestone walls, upon wooden pegs, hung bunches of hare and rabbit skins, turned inside out and stuffed with hay to dry, and which gave to the place a pungent odour. On either side of the low, heavy door, and framing a paneless hole of a window, hung a varied collection of odds and ends, broken parts of harnesses, rusty horseshoes, bits of trace-chains gleaned from the road, and below these a cast-off cook-stove, the pipe of which elbowed its way awkwardly out through the window.

The girl was the first to drink. She drew out the cork with her small, even white teeth, closed her red lips over the bottle's mouth, and, tipping back her pretty head, took a long pull.

"Eh! Eh! enough, you!" growled the old man testily, knitting his bushy eyebrows, and reaching forth a long, sinewy arm as black and hairy as an ape's.

"Wait, you!" snapped the girl, freeing her lips, but the old man wrenched it from her slim brown hand and drank.

"Ugh!" shivered the girl. "That's the good merchandise," she declared, her gray eyes agleam—eyes

which were slightly almond-shaped over her high cheek-bones, and which turned upon the "Cat's" with a flash of devilry.

This girl, who was eighteen, and who answered to the name of Appoline, was as slim, lithe, and hard as a greyhound. She had the small, swallow-like head, the straight nose, and delicately curved nostrils of the French gypsy. Her hair, a silky blond at the nape of her neck, running to auburn, and which she wore neatly done up in a puff secured by a yellow comb with three teeth missing, had lost none of its lustre from the sun, which had bronzed her skin—a skin as smooth as satin. A petticoat of blue-figured calico reached to her bronzed shins, and was secured by a string about her small waist over a coarse, half-sleeved, freshly washed chemise, well open at the neck and fastened below by a gilded tin brooch, that had cost a sou from a travelling pushcart. Both she and the old man had their papers of identity; every vagabond in France gets one by hook or by crook. Upon the old man's was written at the top of the form:

"BONAPARTE PASCAL—Born at Bordeaux, merchant in rabbit skins."

The scrawled signature, close to the mayor's seal below, was by his own hand, and could be deciphered as resembling his name.

Upon the girl's appeared:

"The woman APPOLINE, birthplace and parentage unknown. Basket maker."

It was signed by her own hand by a cross and two dots for identification.

The dog's name was Toto.

The three talked garrulously over the stolen bottle.

"Some must be saved to cook the hare in," declared Pascal violently. He was known as the Père Pascal—no one knows why, since he had never married.

Appoline rose, and going to a shelf above the bed of "braize," came back with half a loaf of peasant bread and two raw onions. These they cut and ate.

"Tiens!" exclaimed Appoline. "That's for you!" And she gave Toto a full quarter of her share of bread. The dog crunched it, gulped, and pressed his head between her slim knees, begging for more.

"Be off!" cried the girl. "You are a glutton! You never know when your belly's full!"

The "Cat" gave him a good portion of his own, with a friendly slap on the jowls.

The Père Pascal, having already finished his share, for it went down well with the drink, closed his great fists upon the table with a grunt of satisfaction and an oath of content; finally he ran his hand through his shock of iron-gray hair, half closed his small bead-like eyes, leaned back, and started to fill his pipe. When he had smoked it half through he passed it to Appoline. The "Cat" smoked his own.

Possibly the old man believed, in the depths of his hairy chest, that the girl loved him, since the cave had housed them for over half a year. Had not

this motley company included the "Cat," she would have long ago disappeared, have taken to the high-road again, in the rickety, greasy carts under which the dogs slept chained. But in the greasy carts life was not easy. The villages they passed through were glad to get rid of them, and only tolerated them on their outskirts, where they were objected to in turn by others. Often there were fights. She had seen two women and a man shot to death in the culmination of a gypsy feud near Arras. Appoline remembered such incidents as these, and worse, ever since she was little: days when she was beaten with the bears. Often, when the men and women were drunk, she went hungry, and lived on the chance scraps she picked up along the roadside, or by begging; and since stealing from the wagon meant another beating, she preferred the roadside. She had never worn a hat, and her slim brown feet had only known shoes in winter. Generally her gypsy wagon moved gently with the seasons and they were not needed.

Once, in passing Trouville, a lady who began by asking, "Who is that creature?"—since the girl was more beautiful than she—ended by giving her a pair of high-heeled, cream kid shoes from her villa, which Appoline accepted, but could not wear. She preferred the comfortable cast-off shoes of men. The lady had generously added a pair of black openwork silk stockings. These, something could be done with. Appoline fashioned them into a yoke for a calico waist, to the jealous envy of a girl in another wagon.

Finally Appoline gave the girl the waist at a fête in Mantes to end the matter. None of these things had affected her beauty; they had developed the daredevil within her, hardened her to a rough life, keyed up her temper (and she had one you may be sure), and, although the Père Pascal and she often quarrelled, she had not forgotten his saving her life from the knife of a jealous lover in a hedged lane near Tours. That day she went along with the Père Pascal and his cartful of rabbit skins with an ugly gash in her back. She had had enough of the gypsy road. The "Cat" was then in jail. It was not until a month afterward, and her wound had healed, that the "Cat" became a poaching partner to the Père Pascal, and first saw Appoline. That night, Appoline, being superstitious, searched over the lines in the palm of her hand, under the lantern's glow, and discovering a tiny cross at the base of her thumb, indicating "surprise" and "a stranger," providing the moon was in the third quarter—and it was—smiled and whispered to herself:

"It is he."

It was close to midnight when the "Cat" brusquely corked the bottle. Appoline had fallen into a doze, her head pillowed upon her arms. The Père Pascal rose, stretched himself, hung the hare by a string through the nose on a peg, turned and bolted the door and shook the girl by the shoulder.

"What?" she mumbled sleepily.

"To bed, you!" growled the Père Pascal.

"Let me sleep!" grumbled Appoline.

Toto yawned, stalking out from his corner among the tumbled quilts. The girl rose drowsily, and half staggered toward the bed of "braize"; the Père Pascal followed. It was the "Cat" who blew out the lantern.

Though he had not said a word to Appoline about his deal with Raveau, he had given her a gold louis for safekeeping, and, though her woman's curiosity had tempted her a dozen times to ask the "Cat" where he got it, she refrained. She had long ago learned to keep her mouth shut over other people's good fortune. As for Raveau's love for Babette, the night's drinking had now wholly dispelled from the "Cat's" mind his intention to tell her father. He turned in between Appoline and the dog, but for a long while he lay awake, thinking of Raveau, that prince of his own world—of his skill—of his generosity.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE lovers found their way out of the thicket by the hidden path which the "Cat" had carefully avoided stepping upon in seeking his ambush.

"Try to go to sleep—promise me," Raveau said to her gently as they stood together in the dusk before the prison gate.

"Yes," she breathed, "I promise."

How calm he was, she thought, and she was still trembling.

"I shall come early in the morning," he continued quietly, pressing her warm little hand in his own.

"At what hour?" she asked in an eager whisper.

"At nine."

"It will—be—long," she faltered half audibly.

Raveau patted her cheek. "Smile, my dearest. There, that is better. Do you know we are going to be tremendously busy?"

She looked at him wonderingly.

"There is much to do before we start off together out into the big world," he told her.

She nodded in silence.

"I shall go to your father to-morrow," he declared.

At the word "father" she raised her head, a sudden

fear came into her eyes, and before she could speak Raveau touched his lips to her forehead and turned to go.

"Good-night," he whispered hurriedly, and thus he left her.

Babette stood gazing after him. Her hand, the hand that a moment before he had held warm in his own, lay idly on the iron latch of the prison gate. A little way down the road Raveau looked back and blew her a kiss. She stood immovable, still trembling with happiness and wonder, until he disappeared in a bend in the road. Then she drew a deep breath, entered the garden, and closed the gate. Slowly she made her way past the roses, scarcely conscious that she moved. The antechamber was dark. Her father was in the village. She entered, lighted a candle, closed the door of her small white bedroom—the candlestick shook in her hand as she set it upon the washstand—and throwing herself face down on the bed she burst into tears.

The lark had awakened.

Her whole being quivered with love—that happiness whose light is dazzling, and whose ever-present shadow is doubt and fear. She sobbed as if her heart would break, gasping sobs that hurt and strangled, and which the comforting old patchwork coverlet of faded blues seemed helpless to stifle, though she buried her face deep in its folds until she cried herself to sleep.

When she awoke the candle, with a thief in its

wick, flamed high. Babette slowly got to her feet, snuffed out the guttering candle, and crept into bed.

"You will go to sleep," he had commanded, and her heart grew calmer and happier, as she closed her eyes and tried hard to obey him. She pillowed her flushed, tear-stained cheek in the hollow of her hand—the hand he had held—and it soothed her.

She slept, and dreamed—of a large place, an enormous wooden shed festooned with cobwebs, where there were cows, and hundreds and hundreds of blue rowboats, and where the floor was all red with blood, and where Raveau came in to meet her father, who was standing in the middle, and ask him for her hand. Then her father flew into a rage and refused; then all the people of the village cheered; and then she dreamed they were on a long, long journey, first in a boat, then in a train—and Raveau disappeared, and she hunted, and hunted for him—up flights and flights of marble stairs—up, up, until she felt her feet weighted with lead, and that she must soon drop and die. And at last she found him—on the top of a white tower, seated on a sort of golden throne, with Emilliène Davos, the daughter of the blacksmith in the village—

Babette awoke with a start, shuddering; the room reappeared to her staring eyes—nothing had changed. The candle stood on the washstand. The silver crucifix above her head glinted dimly in the first light of dawn. As she lay there in a reverie, her eyes half closed, her heart beat, ached, rejoiced—

feared, became gay—sad, guilty, trembled, and grew happy by turns. The remainder of her body seemed numb.

An hour passed, and the rising sun sent a bar of fire across her wall.

Presently she heard her father stirring in his room. Monsieur Pivot dropped his boot and swore; it brought Babette to a frightened realization that she must dress quickly and prepare the coffee. A new terror now crept into her heart as she dressed: Monsieur Pivot did not often swear; it was not his habit. Had he passed the green nest in the thicket and spied upon them? There was a tiny barred window overlooking the thicket on the ground floor of the tower adjoining the antechamber. If he had not seen, did he suspect? Babette's heart beat with fresh anxiety as she thought of these things and bravely combed her hair.

The truth was that it was during his violent refusal among the cows and the blue boats that Monsieur Pivot had at that very moment softly entered the gate, tiptoed through the garden and gone to bed, since he had sat up late with Raveau at the Cerf Noir to corroborate his acceptance.

The talk between them had been full of genial understanding: Babette must know nothing until the morrow, when Raveau would come, as is the custom, beneath the father's roof, to ask him formally for his daughter's hand.

Any one who had peeped into the café of the Cerf

Noir at that moment and noticed them talking earnestly would have said:

"Those two are as thick as thieves."

"I have no white cotton gloves," smiled Raveau, since it is traditional for the fiancé to wear them during his demand.

"Tut!" replied Monsieur Pivot, waving the gloves to oblivion with one hand, while with the other he refilled his glass, for the little cask in the cellar had been drawn on so frequently during the evening's talk that Monsieur Pivot had become florid with geniality and good-will.

Had Babette dreamed of Raveau when asleep, she now continued to dream of him when awake. Her hands that morning took things down, put them back, and made the coffee. The milk boiled over, and the hands managed to save it; a bowl slipped and they rescued it from disaster. Her hands seemed to do it all by themselves from habit, with no aid from the brain.

Babette's whole heart was with Raveau—all of it. Her head seemed empty. It was as if her heart did all the thinking, her hands the work, and her brain had stopped—a void.

Still dreaming, she served the coffee. How grave her father seemed as she poured it out for him behind his chair, fearing to meet his eyes. He had kissed her good-morning on both cheeks as usual, but the brusque, businesslike way he had gulped his coffee in silence, jumped out of his chair, and rushed off to

attend to something in prison, which Babette knew was empty of culprits, frightened her. A few moments after he was gone, the clock in the antechamber pulled itself together and methodically twanged eight.

"At nine," he had said. She began to tremble again under the strain, and going to her room, stood for some moments by her bed with her face buried in her apron. The tiny mirror glimmered at her askew, mocking her. She felt so desolate that something of her old-time spirit returned, and brushing away the tears, she returned to the antechamber to glance for the twentieth time that morning at the clock. As she started to open a heavy drawer in the dresser below it, she suddenly became conscious of a quick step behind her. The room swam, her feet left the floor, and, before she could cry out, Raveau, with the ease which he might have lifted a baby, caught her up, cradling her in his arms.

"I could not wait," he murmured in her ear, and sought her lips.

It was not until he had put her lightly down upon her feet that she poured out to him her fears, telling him of the two nightmares, at which he laughed, and of the danger of the telltale window in the tower, at which he "pooh-poohed," convincing her, as he opened a low door in the wall of the antechamber and peered into the gloomy dungeon beyond, that the window was fully three heads higher from the floor than Monsieur Pivot's, and that her respected father was not an acrobat.

He drew her aside from the door open to the sunlit garden, and taking her fair little head between his hands, looked searchingly into her eyes.

"Was it so long to wait as that?" he questioned tenderly, detecting the tired lines about the corners of her eyes. "Have you really slept?"

Her arms crept softly about his neck.

"I promised you," she replied earnestly with the frankness of a child telling the truth. "Yes, I did sleep—truly—all I could."

A strong wave of content surged through him. He believed her. He would believe her through everything. There was nothing Raveau revered more than the truth. He respected it, as one respects another's religion. He would have staked his life upon her word. To him whom life meant a studied system of lies, and who knew the skilled illusiveness of women's tongues, Babette was the truth itself—a revelation.

"And you? Have you slept?" she questioned him timidly, withdrawing her arm.

For an instant he hesitated, and Raveau did not often hesitate.

"Tell me," she pleaded, as he took her hands in his own.

"Until the sun half woke me up," he declared, smiling.

"It is true?"

"Until Madame Poulet rapped at my door an hour ago," he laughed, patting her cheek.

"Then I am content," she sighed.

He lied; he had not gone to bed until nearly dawn.

They moved deeper in the cool shadow by the table, her hands still in his. Babette became silent; slowly her head drooped.

"You are unhappy," he exclaimed with a start, placing his hands firmly upon her shoulders. "Tell me what worries you?" He tried to force her to look up at him, her breath came quick, and he saw the tears start beneath her lashes. "Tell me," he coaxed, "what worries you?"

"My—my father," she faltered. "You are not angry? He must know. It is not easy the marriage—one must have one's father's consent."

Slowly she raised her head and met his eyes.

"Tell me, you are not angry?" she said faintly, her heart heaving.

"Angry? My dearest! Of course he must know. I intend to go to him to-day," he declared, raising his voice.

"Oh! no! no!" she pleaded breathlessly; "it is better that we wait! Oh! I implore you, wait. He was so strange this morning—so cold! He has gone to the prison. I grew frightened when he went away. He was never like that before."

He drew her close in his arms.

"Look at me, Babette! I love you. Don't you believe in me? Trust me? It is better that I go to him now."

"Oh, I do love you!" she cried tensely. "I love

you," she murmured against his lips, with closed eyes. "It is only because I am frightened, because——"

"Hush!" he intervened, his quick ear catching the sound of Monsieur Pivot's brisk tread in the garden. "Go to your room, smooth your hair—quick, he is coming."

She started from his arms, turned to him a pleading frightened glance, crossed swiftly to her room, and closed the door as Monsieur Pivot's boot touched the threshold of the antechamber.

"Ah, this!" cried Pivot, grasping Raveau's outstretched hand, "is a surprise! Babette! Monsieur Raveau is here!"

Then noticing the closed door, and no response, he continued gayly, with a sly wink at Raveau. "How silly girls are!—always prinking—but you are up early, my good Monsieur. As for me, I am up with the sun—ah! that, always, I have too much to do to play the prince. If the government heaps upon one man's shoulders more than his share—Parbleu! it is not I who complain. I try to do my duty. Only yesterday I discovered an ugly crack in the base of the east tower. I must get a mason. It will be a job of danger, for we shall have to cut out and prop up. The wall is five metres thick. It is in the east tower that the Duc de Bourgignon was imprisoned. You remember his words to his jailers: 'Are you not content to cast a gentleman in hell that you must needs chain him like a felon?' Were it not for my constant vigilance, ah, *that!*—old age is a stubborn

enemy to hold in check. A crack is like a vine, it spreads." He shot open his four fingers and thumb. "Cracks are the devil."

"I have something to say to you, Monsieur," said Raveau gravely, and who during Monsieur Pivot's rapid speech had remained calm and immovable by the table.

The door of Babette's bedroom drew timidly ajar. Monsieur Pivot, noticing it, cleared his throat, and elevated his eyebrows in surprise.

"I am at your service, Monsieur," he returned, in a voice that was both loud and authoritative. "Will you do me the honour, Monsieur, to be seated?"

"If you will permit me, Monsieur, I will stand."

"It is as you wish, Monsieur."

Here Monsieur Pivot folded his arms and riveted his gaze upon Raveau with dramatic intensity. Pure comedy as it was, it was evident that Monsieur Pivot was enjoying the leading rôle. He felt its importance.

"It concerns your daughter," Raveau resumed evenly.

"Um!" exclaimed Monsieur Pivot, again raising his eyebrows. He shut his mouth hard.

"Your daughter, Monsieur, whom I love, whom I wish to marry."

The effect of these words upon Monsieur Pivot was startling. He jerked up straight, squaring his shoulders.

"My daughter, Monsieur," he half shouted, "is

my daughter—I have but one, and so you wish to marry my daughter?”

Raveau ceremoniously inclined his head.

“Sacristi! Monsieur, you astonish me! No, you do not astonish me.” Here Monsieur Pivot shrugged his shoulders. “It is what we old fellows must expect,” he went on, thumping his medalled chest. “Ah!” he sighed, “if Madame Pivot were alive! Her judgment was sounder than mine, Monsieur, in these matters of the heart. One must consider. You say you love Babette—yes, yes, you have told me! Babette has only eighteen years—a child, eh? But she is a good girl. She is not bad-looking, either. There is a good deal about her that reminds me of her mother, but she has a sharp spirit of her own. In that she takes after her father! Ah, in that, yes.” He paused, breathing heavily. “Even if I were to give my consent”—here Monsieur Pivot twisted to a finer point a waxed end of his moustache, and gazing for some moments thoughtfully at the floor, suddenly looked up—“even if I were to give my consent, Monsieur, I doubt if you would accept it. Babette’s dot is small; her own mother had less when we married, but times have changed. Come, I am a soldier; you may speak bluntly when I tell you the amount. We are not rich, Monsieur.”

Raveau raised his hand. “I pray you, Monsieur, not to mention it. You may give Mademoiselle Babette’s dot to the poor of the parish if you like, as

far as it concerns myself. Permit me to add that we love each other, sincerely, profoundly."

The crack of the door of Babette's room widened.

For some moments Monsieur Pivot paced before Raveau in silence, scratching his head. Suddenly he wheeled like a man who had made up his mind.

"Babette! Babette!" he called.

She came slowly into the room with downcast eyes, like a girl awaiting sentence, instinctively; though her father had called her, she drew nearer Raveau, though she did not raise her eyes.

"Eh bien!" Monsieur Pivot blurted out, with a nervous jerk of his head toward Raveau, and the fire in his eye of a commanding general. "Eh bien!" He cleared his throat, at a loss for his words, and began to strut importantly between the open door of the antechamber and Babette's room in silence, his hands clenched behind his back.

"Eh bien!" he resumed at length, halting before Babette, who stood gazing at the floor, her lips quivering. "Listen, my child. Monsieur Raveau has asked me for your hand in marriage. Monsieur Raveau assures me that he loves you—and you, my little rabbit, how is it with you? Do you love Monsieur Raveau?"

Babette, who had grown very pale, flushed as she raised her head, meeting her father's eyes with a courage that made Raveau's heart leap with pride.

"I swear by Sainte Marie, my father—by the head of my mother, I love Monsieur Raveau."

“Eh bien!” cried Monsieur Pivot. “It is well, my little rabbit. I give my consent. If I am short in my words, it is because I am an old soldier; a thing said with me is a thing done.”

Babette swayed as if about to fall, then, with a quick cry of joy, she threw her arms about Raveau’s neck.

“And me? Mon Dieu!” shouted Pivot heartily, throwing out his arms.

“Oh, my father!” she cried, rushing to them.

CHAPTER NINE

IF THERE was one guest at the Cerf Noir who did not sleep that night it was Raveau.

His joy in his realization that Babette was really his own had brought with it a bitter problem to solve—bitter indeed to a man like Raveau, who had suddenly awakened, to discover his soul, through the love of a pure young girl. It was this problem which had kept him awake the night before, longer than he cared Babette should know, and it was this same difficult question to-night that had robbed him of his bed, and found him at dawn, still dressed, and struggling with his thoughts, he having spent half the night roaming along the river, and the remainder of it pacing his room. No wonder, as he paced, and thought, and tried to reason, his wits keyed to their utmost in his struggle to solve the solution, that he looked back upon his past life with bitter regret, and his methods of obtaining money with abhorrence.

A man in his desperate state of mind can only reason one way: toward reform. To repair a life is a colossal task; to remake a character is to effect a miracle. There is nothing easier than to fall: tens of thousands of opportunities grease the way. Temptation, who is the intimate friend of Vice, has a habit

of slapping the victim on the back, and, gripping the fool by the hand, pulls him along genially to meet the devil. To rise out of the mire—to recover honour, conscience, and a soul—takes the grit of a moral giant, and a man like Raveau knew and feared its difficulties. Along the river to-night he told himself the plain truth: that he was an individual with no business recommendation whatever. He knew that to forge credentials to convince those who dealt honestly was only the trick of a crook—a game which, played successfully once, nine times out of ten fails the second time. He knew, too, that if he continued his professional career, was arrested, and sent to jail, he would lose Babette. This thought became paramount in his mind. As he stood there, well out of the sleeping village, gazing down into the black water swirling under a stone bridge, his elbows upon its parapet, his head sunk in his hands, he swore that he would do all in his power to support Babette honestly.

As was his habit, he set to reasoning out this difficult problem in detail, and the more he reasoned, the more hopeless and complex it became. Only a few days before he had aided friends of his toward their intended robbery of a château, and sent the necessary data to the post in care of three innocent Americans. True, he had returned the necklace to the heartbroken daughter, but, then, it must be remembered that it was that very day he had first seen Babette. To-night, as he left the bridge and re-

traced his way toward the village, he washed his hands of the château job for his friends and felt happier. It was at least a beginning, and yet—and yet, what could he do to live honestly? He realized he was a social outcast, though he was thoroughly capable of ingratiating himself into society. Society people he detested, as a rule, for their pose and artificiality. People of good society he respected. Strange as it may seem, he harboured a sincere admiration for those men and women who, by their sterling honesty, have won the respect of a community, and more than once his heart had weakened when he had undertaken a job against them. He had no pity, however, for those who play charity to the gallery, or for those who torture and dominate others by their wealth, as is often the case with the usurer; and the moral hypocrite he despised. He once blackmailed one of these to teach him a lesson—the president of an orphan asylum at C—and forgave him in the end on account of his wife and children.

Raveau realized to-night, as he walked back through the deserted streets of the village on his way to the Cerf Noir, that the one thing which he could not steal was an honest wife and an honest fireside.

At the door of the Cerf Noir he rang up the sleeping porter, thanked him for his good nature, and, groping his way upstairs, entered his room, and there, sunk in its stiff old-fashioned chintz-covered armchair, he smoked incessantly, his mind still struggling with its problem; burning his candle until

dawn, until at last with a weary sigh he got up, looked in the glass, and felt ashamed of his years and his silvery gray hair—a glass that reflected his handsome features, his health and strength and build, all that made him the fascinating, strange personality that he was, even to his well-cut suit of homespun. Raveau went to an excellent tailor, and yet the glass reflected a crook—a seasoned crook, with the triumph of true love within him, and a conscience that had kept him awake for a night and a half face to face with a problem full of doubt, and anxiety for the future—a crook who had reached the zenith of an evil profession, an expert thief, a forger, a blackmailer, and a criminal; and yet to Babette in her innocence he was everything, and had she stood before him then, she would have crept into his arms to tell him again that she loved him. More from the strain of his thoughts than from his sleepless nights, he was a trifle pale and haggard. He was halfway back to his chair when a sudden inspiration seized him.

“Good God!” he cried in English. He drove his hands into the pockets of his coat, his eyes gazing at the worn rose in the pattern of the bedroom carpet. For some moments he stood there musing in silence. Slowly he began to smile—a smile which widened until it broke forth into a soft laugh.

“It’s a fool’s risk,” he continued in English, half aloud. “A fool not to think of that before.” He pushed the butt of a cigarette with the toe of his

shoe away from the rose. "A fool to think of it now at all," he muttered. "Yes and no. There is time enough for careful work, and careful work pays. That's it!" he cried with sudden heat. "That's my game!"

He hastily washed his hands and face, brushed his hair, and being too alive and excited over his decision to remain in his room to shave, picked up his hat and stick, and went out in the village in a fine drizzling rain in search of the barber.

As he passed down a narrow street, in which the quaint gabled windows of centuries ago leaned across to gossip with those opposite, the thin lank figure of a man hopped past him, stopped, turned, and awkwardly lifted his cap with a grin.

Raveau looked up, and recognized the "Cat."

"Go to work!" said Raveau, and passed on.

The "Cat" shoved his cap back on his head and stood looking after him, open-mouthed. He had not the slightest idea what he meant.

Now that her father had given his consent, the lark sang all day. Babette was radiantly happy. The last thirty-six hours seemed to her to have begun in heaven, continued through purgatory, and ended in paradise. She flew at the housework this morning with so light a heart that by eleven not only the antechamber but her own room and Monsieur Pivot's exhaled that freshness that only energy, soap and water, and a clean dust-rag can produce. When

it was all done, and the clock's face wiped, her mind was at rest. She went to her room to do her hair, glanced at it with a pout, let it fall again softly about her shoulders, carefully redid it, and, sitting on the bed, threaded her needle to fashion a new blue bow to please him.

The drizzling rain had increased to a thrashing downpour.

Babette's heart sparkled.

Raw gusts of wind whirled about the great towers, moaning and whimpering under the doors.

Babette sang.

A leaden sky hung ominously over the stark old prison and the dripping village.

Babette's heart was so full of sunshine that during moments it seemed to vaguely brighten the room by its reflection.

Having Raveau in the village to-day, and not expected before the late afternoon, seemed as natural to Babette as if they were already married and he had gone to his business. This psychological change in a girl who is engaged to the one whom she loves is inevitable. Her soul, as it were, is already married; what ensues is only a question of the coming ceremony, and her confidence in the rosy future.

As for Monsieur Pivot, that energetic little man had been strenuously busy since early morning in clearing away the loose stones about the base of the cracked east tower, to have it in readiness for the mason. Happily there was a mason to be had. It

was Monsieur Roquette of the village, who, having but a month previous married the widow of a brick-layer of confidence, had inherited not only his tools, and half a barrel of cement, but the love of his predecessor's profession. Before this, Monsieur Roquette dealt in the sale of small fish from the river, though Madame Poulet preferred for the Cerf Noir the fish of Monsieur Jaquin from the same river, since those of Monsieur Roquette often spent the night with their captor under the table in the stuffy little tavern at the corner of the market-place where Monsieur Roquette was wont to carouse.

It could rain in La Fourche when it wanted to. The rainpipes coughed, sputtered, and grumbled to-day, as they choked out their fill into the gutters. The market-place, with its big shed, about whose deserted stone slabs and counters the mingled odours of yesterday's violent cheeses and dead fish always lingered, was awash. Great pools also lay out in the square itself, and women whose petticoats reached by custom well above their ankles pinned them prudently higher out of the splash of their sabots.

Every one was in a sour humour, even the dogs, the luckiest of whom dozed grouchy as they dried out beside friendly kitchen stoves, the vagabond dogs of the village calmly entering places of shelter where in dry weather they would never have dared put their paws, and like the passerby who is tolerated under a strange doorway, stayed as long as possible.

An old woman in a white cap, whose skinny leath-

ery hands trembled over the handle of a crooked stick, croaked in passing to a red-cheeked, buxom woman nursing another woman's baby under the market shed, that "the good God never forgot La Fourche when He had any rain to spare."

"Ah, no!" laughed back the woman garrulously. "What dirty weather, eh, Mother Gorgeau?"

The old woman stopped, her sharp eyes squinting at the infant as she bent her beak over it, and, with something between a rasp and a chuckle, poked a bony finger lightly against the baby's rosy cheek.

"Is it yours, this little cauliflower?" she wheezed. "Tiens! what a gourmand!"

"'Tis the new one of the daughter of the Mother Baupin's," explained the woman. "She's gone to Tonville with her man to sell a calf."

"You eat well—eh?" returned the Mother Gorgeau, shrewdly scrutinizing the buxom one, every line of whose solid figure swelled generously outward to the utmost.

"Ah! yes!" she laughed, and her mouth spread wide, showing her strong even teeth.

"You have the luck," wheezed the Mother Gorgeau. "I eat like a sparrow. What will you have? When one has no more teeth, one is never well in one's dish—ah!" she exclaimed abruptly, taking her leave. "I must go and find some greens for my rabbits. Au revoir!"

"Au revoir!" called back the buxom one shrilly.

At noon Monsieur Pivot came stamping into the antechamber, shaking the drip from his hat.

"How goes it, my little one?" he called cheerily to Babette. She turned from the cupboard in the corner where she had been arranging the prison account and record books next to her favourite novels.

"Ah! mon Dieu! but I am happy!" she sighed. Never had she looked prettier or rosier, and the blue bow was already in her hair.

"Of course you are happy!" exclaimed her father. "Listen, my child! For me, Monsieur Raveau is a monsieur altogether charming."

Babette's eyes beamed.

"He is what I call a man, a real monsieur—rich, elegant, distinguished; besides, he is not a poseur, either, like most of the monsieurs from Paris. Ah, no!"

"Is he not handsome—and good, father?" cried Babette impulsively. She rushed to him and kissed him. "If you only knew how I suffered, father, fearing you would refuse," and she started to tell him her dream.

"Bah!" laughed Monsieur Pivot. "All girls have dreams, and all dreams are nonsense." Then growing suddenly serious, he added: "Everything is ready for Monsieur Roquette. I have cleared out that pile of rubbish; Monsieur Roquette will thus be able to glance over the situation quickly. One must aid the doctor, that is what I say."

The rain, which had let up for half an hour, fell

again in sheets, and as the wind tore through the garden it sent a flurry of rose-leaves whirling on high.

"Name of a dog!" remarked Monsieur Pivot, as he looked out at the weather in disgust.

"You should have put on your oldest coat," protested Babette.

"My little Babette, when duty calls one does not think of one's clothes. A soldier goes to his duty in what he has on." He fingered his soaked sleeves and muddy pockets with an irritated air over her disapproval.

"Anyway! you are right," he confessed with a shrug. "When one is rich like Monsieur Raveau, one can afford to wear what one chooses"; and started to say, "Now that you are going to be a fine lady," but checked himself and said: "Your father will not know you soon in your pretty clothes."

Babette, who had been too much preoccupied with love to think of finery, her coquetry having only reached as far as the blue ribbon, had indeed not thought of them.

"And then," continued Monsieur Pivot, "I shall no longer have to make the little economies. You have heard what Monsieur Raveau has said about your dot? It is yours nevertheless, my child; we old soldiers do our duty. Ah, mon Dieu! what will you have? It is life! We bring up our children only to have them leave us."

She met his eyes with a gentle look; for the first time that day her smile vanished.

"I have made you sad, father," she said, drawing close to him. "I have thought of the going away, and then you will be alone. It is not gay, the prison, when one is alone. No one is ever alone in the village, but here it is different. That was why I feared you would refuse."

Babette's fair little hand dropped from his damp sleeve, and there ensued a pause, during which Monsieur Pivot's eyes grew moist. He scratched his head thoughtfully, drawing the palm of his hand down over the back of his sunburnt wiry neck. She pressed her soft cheek against his own.

"Come! Come!" he forced himself to exclaim, patting the blue bow. "Courage, my child! It is for the best. You will come to see your father often, eh? my little rabbit?"

"Oh, yes, father!" she said faintly, brushing her eyes with the back of her hand, "and then you will come to us often, often—tell me?"

"Of course, that is well understood. Listen, my child! At first I was strongly opposed to the marriage. I said to myself, 'Sacristi!' for I did not like Monsieur Raveau at first."

She looked up at him with sad, astonished eyes which did not seem wholly to comprehend.

"And you know when I do not like any one I am not easy."

"I know," she breathed.

"At first I knew nothing of Monsieur Raveau," Monsieur Pivot went on. "Now I know all. One

must be severe and tactful in these affairs. Ah! what a good fellow! You shall see; we shall get along famously.”

Babette was smiling again.

“Tiens! It was only yesterday he said to me as he was leaving: ‘My friend, had I only your good sense and energy. Had France more men like you!’ Ah! I know a compliment when it comes from the heart. You know well that Madame Poulet’s place is old-fashioned. Sapristi! in these modern times one cannot do enough to please strangers. Now there is the Père Granville’s place for sale—a monsieur of Monsieur Raveau’s fortune——”

Two slow raps at the door of the antechamber cut his sentence short.

“Ah! the good luck!” cried Monsieur Pivot, as he turned briskly, grasped the knob, and flung open the door wide to a short, tow-headed man wearing a blue jean jacket and trousers.

“How goes it, my good Monsieur Roquette?”

Monsieur Roquette steadied himself between two hiccoughs, slid half a sack of cement off his back with a grunt, wavered, dropped a trowel clattering over the wet doorsill, and carefully getting down upon his knees tried to recover it, with a leery eye.

Babette fled to her room.

CHAPTER TEN

AFTER several unsuccessful efforts to speak coherently, Monsieur Roquette rose from his knees, careened against the doorsill, straightened up, and having got the garden path leading to the cracked tower well in line with his best eye, made a brave attempt to follow it. Unfortunately it no longer resembled the path he had known! it had become strangely braided with two other paths he had never seen before, and the pattern thus formed dilated and narrowed beneath his three feet. Despite Monsieur Pivot's guiding grip under his armpit, the path rose up in his face and shook itself; at this Monsieur Roquette broke forth in song about the virtues of Madame Roquette and the glory of France, sat down in a bed of daisies, and began to weep. It was not until two days later that Monsieur Roquette mixed his mortar and began at a snail's pace to repair the crack, a task which, it must be said to his credit, he accomplished to Monsieur Pivot's entire satisfaction, he having kept sober expressly for the occasion.

No one knows who was the first to confide the news to La Fourche, certainly not Madame Poulet, who heard it from the Mère Blondel in the market-

place, who got it from Emilliënne Davos, who was told it by a red-haired girl who came with a white horse to be shod to her father's shop before noon. Neither could it have been the Mère Truchard, who, having been more like a devoted nurse to Babette ever since she was a baby, was the only one Babette had told, and that only the day before, as a great secret. Certain it was, nevertheless, that the news, like the prize rocket in a village fête, went whizzing up from that centre of gossip, the market-place, and burst in a shower of multicoloured details over the village. On went the news, up one crooked street and down the others, slyly turned corners, slipped out of its way to enlighten alleys, and, passing the outskirts of La Fourche, was carried on by a pedler and his girl to Tonville, and by sundown had reached the hamlet of Genvière with a young farmer's wife, where it crossed the river to Les Moulins on the tip of the Mère Foquet's tongue, who, having sold out her vegetables, had reserved it for her favourite café next to the telegraph office, where it stopped, since Paris had no interest whatever in the love affairs of La Fourche, although it would, no doubt, have printed a short item over its total destruction by fire or flood, and given it four columns had there been a murder and the victim was pretty.

That which became of vague interest in the babble of conversation in neighbouring hamlets assumed a colossal importance in La Fourche. No one talked of anything else.

"Who did you say?" inquired those yet in ignorance, cranning their necks over the warm shoulders of others so as not to miss a word.

"It is the daughter of Monsieur Pivot the jailer," they were told, as if Babette had met with a serious accident.

"Tiens!"

"To whom?"

"It is to the gentleman at the Cerf Noir."

"What?"

"Allons! Allons! That's too strong!"

"It is not possible!"

"That fine-looking gentleman, eh?"

"They say he's very rich."

"Ben sûr! he's rich, one can see that as plain as the nose on one's face."

"They say he's a great banker in Paris—a Conseiller Municipal also."

"A millionaire."

"I should think so!"

"She has the luck, that little one."

"Bah! she's not so beautiful."

"Eh bien! she's not so ugly."

"En—er—a nice little face."

"She's not badly made."

"One cannot expect everything."

"It is the Père Pivot who will be content, eh? Oh! là! là!"

"You can well believe."

"Penses tu!" agreed in unison three toothless

old women and the red-cheeked maid of the Cerf Noir.

Thus the news leaked out two days before Babette, Raveau, and Monsieur Pivot had decided to announce it, since Raveau had insisted that the wedding should take place as soon as possible, and the law exacted a week at least to elapse in which to publish the banns.

Had the "Cat," as it were, let himself out of the bag in mild revenge? Who could prove it? Since he himself told Javarde, the carter, that he had it from Madame Poulet herself, a fact which was never proved, although the "Cat" had worked for her half a day cleaning out a cesspool. Possibly it was Raveau's sharp retort as he passed him on his way to the barber's that had stimulated him to the job; and although the "Cat" had not seen him from that moment of bewilderment, he still regarded him as his master.

He feared him.

In the village Raveau became the centre of interest. Never had La Fourche contained so distinguished a fiancé. It was no longer possible for him to go to and fro from the Cerf Noir as a stranger; he was no longer a stranger in La Fourche. Villagers whose names he did not know stopped to bow and shake his hand, to congratulate him, and impress him with the virtues of Mademoiselle Babette, dwelling with especial stress upon her virtues and her honesty. To them it would seem that Mademoiselle Babette was the one mademoiselle in La Fourche eligible to eulogy, and

though they did not tell Raveau so in so many words, they hinted at the imperfections of the other girls, all of whom it must be admitted had changed their sweet-hearts with that fickle ease with which they flirted, fell in love, and fell out again. There were some pretty girls in La Fourche, ah! yes! indeed! The young men of the villages of Tonville and Les Moulins who tramped over to see them on fête days and Sundays could vouch for that. They made the dingy, noisy, tinselled little fête of the village, that occurred once a year in La Fourche, popular, but for the most part they were not serious young girls, whereas Mademoiselle Babette was really serious and had happily been brought up by a father of so many excellent qualities as Monsieur Pivot, all of which Raveau cleverly listened to with an amused satisfaction, knowing the peasants well enough to scent their interest in his pocketbook rather than his heart. The little daughter of the jailer had leaped into sudden and universal favour. Cinderella had been chosen by the Prince, and Babette, whom La Fourche had snubbed as a little nothing-at-all, and simply the daughter of a respectable turnkey, now became the pride of the village. Monsieur Pivot could scarcely believe his ears when it was discreetly rumoured that there was a strong desire on the part of certain select men of the village, high in La Fourche's municipal politics, to propose his name in the coming candidature for Mayor, Monsieur Bolboeuf the present Mayor's term having nearly expired.

The first inkling of this stupendous honour reached Monsieur Pivot through Javarde, the carter, who, it will be remembered, was deeply devoted to him, and was corroborated by Barbouche, both he and Javarde having overheard it in the café next to the Mayor's office and public school.

"It was this way," explained Barbouche in an excited whisper: "Messieurs Davos and Lefèvre, and the Père Biot, all three, as you know, of the Municipal Conseil, with the Père Carniveau, were having a glass together close to Javarde and I.

"For me," said Lefèvre, 'Monsieur Pivot is a brave man, an excellent citizen.'

"That's true," agreed Carniveau and Davos. 'He would make an excellent mayor.'

"And said the Père Biot, 'you have reason, my old one.'

"It only remains to propose him and we shall see," said Lefèvre."

Monsieur Pivot was flushed with pride and confusion; he swelled out his chest, and tried to listen gravely and modestly, but his knees shook with emotion.

"You heard it, Javarde—eh?" Barbouche went on gesticulating. "You heard Lefèvre say it?"

Javarde blinked and nodded and affirmed: "All that Barbouche says is true."

Mayor of La Fourche!

Long after the two had gone Monsieur Pivot's heart kept thumping: such extraordinary news can only come as a shock.

Lefèvre's words, "It only remains to propose him," sang in his brain.

Mayor of La Fourche! Never had he in his wildest flights of ambition expected this. If it all came true! He felt giddy, and every nerve in him tingled. He could already picture himself fulfilling, with every vestige of his devotion to duty, the high dignity of the office. He would wear the tricolour sash with the gold tassel, and be invested with the right to marry people, visé papers of identity, issue shooting permits, use his authority in a thousand and one things relative to the sanity and prosperity of the village, and cause the arrest of those who deserved it. Mayor, ah, name of a dog! From Mayor one could arrive to be Conseiller Général of the *Department*. It had happened before; and so on to député with a salary of fifteen thousand francs a year; from député to senature—Parbleu! Then *Ministre!* President of the *Chambre*, and from President of the *Chambre* to the Presidency of the République—Monsieur Poincaré, for example.


Monsieur Pivot's flight of imagination only stopped when it had reached this supreme office. He went into the prison, where it was silent and cooler. The coming wedding, with which his whole mind had been engrossed for days, now seemed of slight passing importance. He sat down on a creaky prison cot to think and steady his nerves. A wild desire seized him to rush to Raveau and tell him all he had heard, and though he refrained from telling Babette, he

poured out his pent-up feelings to Raveau that evening after supper in the garden.

What was his elation to learn that Monsieur Lefèvre and the Père Biot had already been to Raveau that very morning. That the talk had waxed confidential, and that Raveau had given his word to them to do all in his power to facilitate Monsieur Pivot's election. To this end he proposed going at once to Paris—a week yet remained before the wedding. There were some personages high in politics there whom he knew who would be of vast assistance. Now the truth was that the proposed candidature for mayor had come in the nick of time. It was imperative for Raveau to go to Paris at once if he was to carry out his decision. The funds which he had brought with him to the Cerf Noir, with a wedding, a honeymoon, and a wife to provide for, were getting dangerously low, and for several days he had been at his wits' end what to tell Babette as a reason for his absence. One thing he had given her to understand: that he was an orphan, that both his father and mother had died when he was a boy, and that but for some distant relatives he rarely if ever saw, and his brother in Bordeaux, who would in a few days arrive to be present at the wedding, he was alone in the world.

All he had told her was true—save the brother.

He had already sent a hundred francs to the poor of the parish, and another fifty francs toward buying fireworks for the village fête next August. These



princely donations had their effect in making the stranger beyond suspicion, and it is safe to say that had some old enemy of his in the detective service tracked him to La Fourche with a warrant for his arrest, the entire village would have protested. Nothing installs confidence with the peasants more than the generous expenditure of money for their own good.

It was the evening before his departure, and they were alone together in the moonlit garden.

"So you see, my dearest," he said, "it won't be long. I shall be back before you know it and bring Paul with me! He should be due in Paris from Bordeaux Friday morning, and we shall be here Saturday."

She drew his cheek against her own.

"Suppose Paul does not like me," she whispered with singular appeal.

"Like you? Ah! my adorable one, you shall see Paul's eyes when he sees you. He will adore you, this big brother of mine."

"Tell me, Pierre, are they like yours—his eyes? No one ever had such dear eyes as you, my Pierre."

She forced him to stop while her soft hand smoothed back his silvery gray hair in the moonlight.

"Paul's are very black," he laughed softly. "He is a big, jolly fellow. Ah! you shall see. You would never take us for brothers."

"Is it true?" she smiled.

"A good fellow is Paul. Every one likes him.

Listen, my Babette! You must promise me something. You are very tired, my dearest. Everything is really ready for the wedding. You must rest while I'm gone."

"Oh, but there is such a lot to do yet, Pierre."

"You must rest all you can," he insisted. "I have made the last arrangements with Monsieur le Curé at the church. Ah! that good Madame Poulet. She has thought of everything for the Cerf Noir. I am glad we are to have the old dining-room, after all, for the luncheon. It will be big enough for dancing, as the floor in the Salon des Noces upstairs is full of splinters. Madame Poulet herself advises the dining-room—it is nearer the kitchen, and at the last wedding everything got cold bringing it through the courtyard."

"Listen, Pierre! If father is elected, I shall always say that it was you, my dearest, who did it. Everything and everybody seems so different now in the village. Ah! you do not know, but no one cared about us before, and now——"

"There, there!" said he, kissing her hair. "It is because of that good father of ours that I tell you it is wise that I immediately go to Paris. As I said, I have old friends there who can help him."

Babette clapped her hands. "He will be so happy!" she cried. "It will be wonderful. Yes, my dearest, it is better that you go. You see I am happy, and braver. Ah! if you knew how happy I am—all day long. Monday is so near now, and then——"

"Then we shall start out for the big world. Ah! if you only knew how big it is. How would you like finding a little house near Paris with a garden all your own?"

Babette was radiant.

"Oh, yes, a little garden surely!" she cried. "How I love flowers. Father is always too busy to care much for them. I planted nearly all these myself. Are they not beautiful, Pierre—to-night in the moonlight?"

"You shall have your garden," said he; "and we shall have, besides, a little apartment in Paris to run to when we like."

He glanced at his watch in the brilliant moonlight.

"What time is it?" she asked anxiously.

"We have a little while yet," he returned; "a half-hour at the most; then I must go; it is nearly midnight."

"Kiss me!" she breathed. "Pierre, listen! I love you so. Is it not wonderful, the love? Soon you will not leave me—ever. There will be no going away, Pierre. You see, I am brave."

The garden lay hushed. Now and then the breath of the cool night breeze rustled its leaves, carrying with it the perfume of the roses.

"I love you," he murmured, seeking her mouth. "I swear to you I love you with my whole heart and soul." He felt her tremble in his arms, and for a long while neither spoke. Suddenly the vibrant half-

cracked bell in the belfry of the gray church below in the village started to strike its round of twelve.

"Babette!"

She seemed to awake as if from a dream.

"I must go," he said tenderly.

"Pierre——" She tried to say more but could not.

"Come, be brave, my dearest; we shall go to the gate together. And think!—when I come to it again it will be the day before our wedding."

"Pierre!" He felt her warm tears creep over his hand. "Pierre, I am brave—kiss me!" And then: "I shall rest, I promise you—until Saturday."

He caught her in his arms again, straining her to him—reached out, unlatched the gate, closed it softly, and was gone.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

HAVING left La Fourche with Javarde and his cart at six in the morning, taken the train at Les Moulins, and caught the express at Tours, Raveau entered the city of Paris by noon.

Half an hour later found him in the bar of the "Sans Souci," in a quiet side street just off the rue St. Lazare, where he was well enough known as "Monsieur Pierre," retired dealer in Bordeaux wines (white and red)—as well known as "Monsieur Jacques," whose vast inside knowledge of the race tracks brought him enough to pay for his absinthe, his laundry, which was both scant and ingenious, and his room, which was small.

There were others who frequented the "Sans Souci" as well as he: La Grande Anna, whose gowns, false jewels, and splendid figure were the envy of Friquette, frivolously serious in all things—a packet of nerves peppered with a temper. And Suzanne, dove-eyed, plumed, and stupid. And the Marquis de Franchefalouche, he of the embroidered waistcoat and the second-hand spats. This exceedingly polite and florid little marquis, through whose alcoholic veins once ran some of the best blood in France, and which, like some rich Burgundy, neglected by his

family, had thinned out to "vin ordinaire." And Marguerite, the spoiled and powdered doll of a large automobile firm "overrun with orders," and about to fail. And pretty little Titi—Titi with her washed gilt purse, Titi whose pearl-gray silk stockings were her pride, and who wore them with that indifferent modesty with which some celebrities wear a decoration. These, and many more skimmed from the froth of Paris by the hand of Fate, crowded the gaudy supper-room of the "Sans Souci" nightly: a motley collection, cleverly struggling to drink and eat and live, at somebody else's expense, even to the Baroness Karenzoff, to whom jewels and smart frocks were things of the past, and who contented herself in poverty, while she raked the ashes of her heart to discover among the embers a spark of bygone friendship.

Madame Jean—the patronne—short, fat, and damp with cold cream—rose daily a little after noon, and like her jolly barman, Fred, and her two busy waiters, Emile and Théodore, attended strictly to business until the "Sans Souci" closed at five the next morning. No one got much sleep at the "Sans Souci," not even the two fox terriers, who begged at the supper tables, killed rats in the cellar, and always smelt of perfume from being patted.

As usual, Monsieur Pierre's room was ready for him in the inevitable hotel upstairs. This room—the best in the house—possessed that atmosphere of home-like respectability vouched for by several crayon por-

traits of Madame Jean's own family on her father's side, and two daguerreotypes of herself, when a baby, on the mantelpiece.

It was a transient hotel—transient in every sense of the word. Its entrance was so modest beside that of the glittering all-night restaurant and bar, that any one in passing might easily have missed it had not his eye caught a glimpse of the good-looking, black-eyed maid in her neat white cap and apron, and the sign which announced, in small gold letters:

*"Chambres Meublées
Confort moderne."*

Purely personal and private history was not a popular topic of conversation in the "Sans Souci," and the gossip was of that free and easy character which could do no further harm to those whom it concerned.

The "Sans Souci" was a place full of electricity and discretion, and an old hang-out of Raveau's in time of need—a place where billets doux, letters, verbal messages, and telegrams were guarded by the pretty widow at the desk next to the bar with the care of a diplomat entrusted with an embassy bag destined for his government. She, through whose manicured hands passed all the cash of the "Sans Souci," had a very pretty hand, and when she gave a note to whom it was strictly intended she did it with a smile and the address turned down.

The greeting Raveau received on his return was

genuine and hearty. Madame Jean, who took a sort of motherly interest in her habitués, embraced him, complimenting him upon his looking the picture of health—his ruddy skin. “Ah! the air of the country! One is lucky who can voyage,” she declared with a sigh. “It is my dream—the country,” she continued, carefully straightening Raveau’s cravat. “The good milk, the good sleep——”

“Madame!” shouted the *femme de chambre*.

“What?”

“The monsieur with the ice.”

“Ah! mon Dieu! one is never at rest. Tell him twenty kilos is enough.”

“It is well, Madame.”

“Eh, Marie!” Madame Jean’s voice shrilled. “I don’t want any more of the dirty ice he gave me yesterday. Do you understand, my girl?”

“It is well, Madame.”

“Eh, Marie! Here is his money—and give him a good glass of wine.

“Is it permitted to give such ice?” she went on rapidly in her excitement, nervously patting into place the stray whisps of her bronzed hair. “Is it not shameful? Ah! mon Dieu! the bandits!—the thieves! What is Paris coming to? One is swindled right and left in everything.”

“Allons! Allons!” coaxed Raveau soothingly. Madame Jean’s flutter of excitement gradually subsided in short breaths.

Though only a vestige of her former youth and

beauty remained, she still believed most of the men she had known were still in love with her. There were days when she suffered from jealousy like a child, though she was generous to a fault, and as kind a woman as ever lived. She had grown enormously stout, but she was still as careful about her dress as a "courtisane," and like her right-hand lieutenant at the desk, the pretty widow, was continually polishing her nails. She polished the aristocratic nails of the Marquis de Franchdalouche as well—for nothing—and often, on rainy afternoons, those of Titi and Marguerite when they dropped in for a beer. La Grande Anna could still boast of her own manicure—naturally—since she lived on the same floor with her up in the rue Lepic, and the two had known the day when they were glad to share ten sous of "charcuterie" between them, or cook on the oil stove of La Grande Anna, a beautiful filet of horse, garnished with six sous' of potatoes, and had you seen La Grande Anna supping by luck that night at Maxim's, resplendent in her hired gown, her hired hat, and her rented jewels, which were as false as her hair, you would never have guessed the truth à propos of the rue Lepic and the oil stove—or even of Anna!

There was something intime about the "Sans Souci." Madame Jean struggled to make it home-like. In slack hours the pretty widow plied her needle over her dainty lingerie back of the desk, a source of delight to the Marquis, whose ready wit could turn anything into a "double entendre." Ma-

dame Jean reminiscenced over her childhood with a filial reverence that now and then brought the tears dangerously close to the pencilled lashes, especially when she eulogized the strictness of her mother. She would tell you, too, of the day she stole the apples from the orchard of the Père Canvar. "Ah but!—would she ever forget it?" No, there are some things one never forgets. And then when Madame Jean was forced to go to the Commissaire de Police over the unpaid bill of some transient guest who had taken "English leave," she did so half reluctantly. She was a good soul.

Raveau had a heavy night before him. He was no longer the Raveau of old, that a few weeks before had slipped down to Tourraine to oblige some friend in his profession. He was in love—hopelessly in love. A miracle had taken place, inasmuch as his heart and mind had undergone a strange transformation. That which he had decided to do, and which had come to him as an inspiration after his two sleepless nights at the Cerf Noir, was now ripe for execution. Nothing in his calm, genial manner to-night in the "Sans Souci" betrayed to its habitués that which was uppermost in his thoughts. The risk he was about to take, he knew, was big—a fool's risk he even told himself to-night; and if he failed—The situation was serious enough, with a bride awaiting him Sunday. Never had he needed money as he needed it now. In other crises, alone in his adven-

turous career, money was a luxury; to-night it was an absolute necessity. He was no longer alone in life. He had Babette.

He had chosen to put up at the "Sans Souci" for reasons best known to himself; neither its atmosphere nor the forced gayety of its habitués affected him. He was used to thousands like them. The underworld he knew as well as his pocket. Adaptable as he always was, he laughed and joked with them at five, over drinks, and remained at his table long after dinner, until the gaudy little restaurant became a supper-room, hazy with cigarette smoke, and noisy with the strident laughter of women. It was a little past midnight when Emile, the waiter, helped him on with his overcoat and called a taxi.

At the corner of a silent, short, respectable-looking street, halfway up Montmartre, Raveau got out, paid the chauffeur, turned down the street, and, walking briskly to the door of its last house on the right, shadowed by a garden, stopped and rang the bell.

The house, once the private hotel of a famous actress, was a palatial one; its richly carved façade, looming up in the dark, made the rest of the street look plain and commonplace. Not a light was visible in any of its windows. It stood silent and dark, and to all appearances vacant and abandoned.

Presently the door at which Raveau stood was cautiously opened by a servant in knee-breeches, and Raveau passed in, followed the servant beneath

the porte cochère, entered a vestibule on the right, handed his coat, stick, and hat to a liveried boy, and ascended a broad, winding, elaborately carved stairway of black oak. On the second landing Raveau stepped out upon a low minstrel gallery, and glanced down into the superb and half-lighted ball-room below—a noble room, with a ceiling thirty feet high, richly gilded, tapestried, and curtained in green velvet; a room that once held upon its polished floor the wit and beauty of Paris—the rendezvous of famous men and women, and which seemed to openly confess to the visitor that it was no longer respectable.

Directly below Raveau, grouped at little tables before a magnificently carved and hooded chimney-piece, sat a score of pretty women, exquisitely gowned and jewelled, chatting with as many men, some of whom were in evening dress, and all of whom were drinking champagne. One of these women, a celebrated soprano, in whose dark hair gleamed a jewelled aigrette, raised her eyes mischievously, recognized Raveau, and smiled. The military-looking man at her elbow bowed gravely. Raveau bowed formally, then he left the gallery, and continued up the stairs. In the broad deserted corridor of the floor above he stopped to knock at a small black door, upon which was thumbtacked a sign:

“NO ADMITTANCE”

What was this mysterious palatial house—empty of furniture save tables and chairs—silent without,

almost as silent within, save for the soft laughter of the women below the minstrel gallery, and the repartee of their escorts. Had you been known in the mondaine society of Paris, you would have discovered by the circular sent you that it was called "Le Club des Arts Modernes." Precisely! A club whose purpose it was to bring together those of the élite whose mutual love and appreciation of the arts made the club possible. Nothing could be plainer. What a charming idea!

So well organized was "Le Club des Arts Modernes" that tea and music were served quietly in the ballroom every afternoon at five. There was also a real artist's studio to let on the fourth floor, at a suspiciously low price per month. It was bare of furniture, save for a huge divan, canopied by a dusty Turkish curtain triumphantly upheld by two stage spears. The grave valet who had the key would inform you that the artist wept when he was obliged to give it up, while the two furnished rooms above, approached by a short flight of stairs to the right of the studio, pleased two Bolivian gentlemen so much that they had wired to secure them again upon returning from their native land. Unhappily, both gentlemen were indicted for forgery a week before they were to sail.

Simultaneously as Raveau knocked at the small black door it was flung open in his face, and a young woman, whose lithe figure seemed to have been poured into a glittering gown of aqua marine pail-

lettes, brushed past him sobbing, followed by a man, his hand upon her cool bare shoulder trying to pacify her.

"It is terrible!" she moaned. "What can I do? Ah, mon Dieu!"

"Ah, Zut! you little embecile!" exclaimed her escort, losing his temper. "You are always like that! You will listen to no one!"

She stopped on the stairs, burying her face in her ringless hands, her escort trying to urge her on.

Again Raveau halted before entering, to allow a Russian woman to pass out—a woman whom he knew, but did not dare recognize, since she was with a gentleman he also knew, who did not care to be recognized. Her eyes were gleaming, and her beautiful face was alight and glowing with a sort of savage triumph. This time no one barred his way; he entered, and, having groped in the dark through a narrow passage, rapped at a second door, which was discreetly opened by an attendant who looked Raveau over, nodded, and opened a third door wide to the room beyond—a feverish room, crowded to suffocation, and as silent as death. A light, under a round black shade, poured down its steady rays upon a green baize table, strewn for the moment with gold pieces and bank-notes. Within the circle of light lay fair white arms and nervous jewelled hands beside the strong, tense hands of men. The faces were in shadow.

"Baccarat!" announced, coldly, a man in evening

dress, seated in the middle of the table, and whose chair was higher than the rest.

"Allons! Messieurs, to whom the bank?" he cried, sharply.

For a moment no one spoke—a silence that was disturbed only by the chink of gold and the crisp rustle of bank-notes, as the one who had spoken from the high chair swept in his gain. Shoving the heavy gold into his trousers pocket, the bank-notes into another, he lighted a cigarette and rose stiffly from his chair, flushed with success.

"Allons! Messieurs!" repeated with insistence a rat-eyed, waxen-faced man at the extreme end of the table. "To whom the bank?"

"To me," said Raveau calmly, taking the vacant chair.

There was a general murmur of approval.

Sixty-seven thousand francs! That was the sum Raveau rose from the table at dawn with. He had won it fairly, squarely—a straight, honest game.

He had risked his entire capital, a little under four thousand francs, a sum which he had stubbornly reserved at La Fourche outside of his modest expenses there. It had been a strenuous night's play. There is no sentiment in baccarat. It is a dangerous, rapid, pitiless game of high stakes, and yet the personality of a player has always had its influence in games of chance. Raveau's magnetic personality held his gambling audience with him. Many gamblers are

famous hypnotists. Women have always had a way of losing to good looks. Raveau was not only exceedingly handsome—he was distinguished. He won the confidence of those about him with that ease in which no effort was apparent, often simply by that attractive smile of his, by his good-breeding, and his generosity. There had been moments during the night's play when it seemed impossible for him to recover his losses, yet he had not flinched. The game he was playing was a desperate one, since it concerned his future and the one thing in life that was dear to him—Babette. At about three in the morning his luck changed. Two big fistfuls of bright gold louis lay under his hands, and beneath his cigarette case eleven thousand francs in clean French bank-notes, a sum which had steadily increased. Many of those playing against him had been hard hit. Conspicuous among these was a cavernous-eyed man, the muscles of whose jaw worked convulsively as he lost; also a blasé young fellow, incessantly smoking cigarettes and losing, and especially a young woman at Raveau's left elbow. He felt sorry for this woman. She was slender, young, and pretty, appeared to be not over twenty-three years of age, looked like a lady, and was. She was alone, spoke to no one, and played feverishly, losing coup after coup, with no evident knowledge of the game. Her lithe figure, the exquisite refinement of her gown, her girlish arms and neck, devoid of jewellery save a wedding ring upon her small hand and a single pearl in the narrow fillet binding her rich

auburn hair, attracted Raveau's attention the moment she entered the room and took her seat beside him. And when finally she lost to him her last louis with a frightened gasp, it hurt him to the quick.

"I regret, Madame, sincerely," Raveau said to her quietly as she rose with a peculiar gaze of terror in her dark-brown eyes. The word "sincerely" was spoken earnestly, and so low that she alone heard it. She turned and looked at him blankly, with quivering lips.

"Wait for me," Raveau murmured, leaning close to her without turning his head. She flashed him a look of indignation, then, conquered by his kindly smile, left him without opening her lips. He could see her, as he handled the cards, making her way bravely to the door. A few moments later he was conscious of her presence behind his chair.

"I shall wait," she whispered tremulously over his shoulder. Free to glance up for a second, he saw her disappear in the passage guarded by the three doors.

The row of jewelled hands remaining beneath the circle of light betrayed the faces in shadow—small, nervous feminine hands, that twitched under excitement, fear, and despair; strong, brutal hands, clenched in sullen desperation; nervous white fingers, used to kisses, that trembled, hesitated, and, womanlike, plunged on to ruin.

Even the jewels became fewer beneath that fatal circle of light. The marquise ring—a turquoise set in diamonds—no longer glittered upon the forefinger

of a tall brunette opposite Raveau. A ruby pendant and a splendid collar of pearls, the latter encircling the white throat of a blonde, who, like the blasé youth, smoked incessantly, had likewise disappeared from view. Nothing was easier in "Le Club des Arts Modernes" than to obtain money at a heavy sacrifice. Adolphe attended to that—Adolphe the maître d'hôtel, he with the smug face of a priest, the eyes of a ferret, and the long side-whiskers, known as "favoris," slightly curly, dyed, and glistening in brilliantine.

He did a thriving trade in rings, in jewelled garters, in the latest mode in slipper buckles; even to lace petticoats and lingerie of mark. Adolphe, the last resource! How they used to pocket their pride (it being the only thing left to pocket), plead with him and meekly accept what he offered. Once he became the possessor of a whole evening gown. The lady sent for her wrap from the vestiaire—as they were airing the gaming-room.

Strange as it may seem, this "club" had flourished for months near the very heart of Paris, where it is strictly against the law to maintain a public gambling house within a hundred kilometres of the fortifications, the Casino of Enghien being the very nearest. Any day it ran the risk of being raided by the police. Raveau was right when he reasoned that his presence there was a fool's risk in more senses than one. The life of a "free crook" is always more or less under the surveillance of the police. A man with Raveau's record is careful where he goes, and

yet the coolest head in this baccarat room during the strenuous night that had just paled to a chill, gray dawn was Raveau's. He was not there for pleasure. He was gambling for a wife.

Raveau found her waiting for him as she had promised, seated alone at a small table in the corner of the now stale and deserted ballroom. A strange little figure she made, as out of place in the "Club des Arts Modernes" as some young and innocent débutante in a dive.

As he moved rapidly across the polished floor toward her, she nervously buttoned her gloves, ceased tapping her tiny slippered foot beneath her opera-cloak of silver-gray satin, made a movement as if to rise, retained her seat, and looked up at him bravely as he drew near.

"Madame," said Raveau graciously, as he stood before her and bowed, "forgive my intrusion! When I asked you to wait for me, I trust you did not misunderstand my meaning. I meant it in all due respect to you, I assure you."

"Had I misunderstood you, Monsieur," she returned nervously, averting her brown eyes, "I should not have waited."

Her voice, though it trembled a little, was sweet and frank. Raveau saw, as she turned her girlish head, the freshness and refinement of her beauty, the pure contour of her cheek, her sensitive mouth, her rich auburn hair brushed back from her temples—all

these seemed the more adorable under the strain of her emotion. It was evident she was not used to meeting strange gentlemen anywhere, and yet this little lady had waited for him bravely for an hour and a half. Evidently the reason was desperate enough. It seemed incredible.

"Will you permit me to be seated, Madame?"

"Oh, do, I pray you," she returned breathlessly, nervously twining and untwining her gloved hands.

"Do you come here often, Madame?" he asked gently, drawing his chair opposite her at the table.

"Oh, why should you ask me!" she exclaimed painfully, with an effort to control her quivering lips.

"Forgive me," he returned, "I am indiscreet. I regret profoundly that I should have been the one to have caused you your loss to-night. I tell you this sincerely, since it was evident to me upstairs that you were wholly ignorant of what you were doing, and more evident to me now. You should never, never have come here, my dear lady. If I offend you, I humbly beg your pardon. I am an old gambler—almost old enough to be your father."

Her lips tightened.

"Permit me to make it clearer, for I feel, now that I have spoken, that you have more confidence in me than during the moment I took your last louis. It hurt me to do it, but we were playing in public, Madame, and I dared not insult you by refusing your stake."

The effort she made to control herself as he spoke became pitiful.

"You were as unused to the people about you," Raveau went on gently, "as the game they played. I am right, am I not?"

She bowed her head in silence, and murmured half-audibly, "But what you won, Monsieur, you won fairly."

"It is not fair," smiled Raveau, "to win money from a lady who is totally ignorant of the game she plays. How often have you played baccarat?"

Her hands trembled in her lap, and she grew a little pale.

"Oh, please, do not ask me!" she exclaimed; and then with sudden impulse, flushing to her temples, "It is terrible what I have done! I am so unhappy! You would not understand even if I told you."

"How often have you played baccarat?" insisted Raveau. "Come, I am an old gambler—it is my profession. You are in great trouble, Madame. That is why I asked you to wait for me. As far as lies in my power I intend to help you out of it."

She met his eyes with an eager, startled look, leaning forward on the little table between them, wide-eyed, with parted lips, a ray of hope now in her heart.

"You *will* help me?" she gasped. "Oh, please—if you knew—I dared not go home until I had seen you. At first when you spoke to me—forgive me if I was indignant—I was miserable and beside myself with anxiety. Oh, why did I ever come here!"

"There are some things," continued Raveau, seeming not to notice her agony of mind, "that should never occur in our profession, and yet which are beyond any honest gambler's control. Things which are positively unjust."

Her breath came quick and her ardent brown eyes slowly filled with tears.

"Positively unjust," repeated Raveau. "I have seen men ruined. It is a common sight in our profession. There are all kinds of fools. Some blow out the remainder of their brains. Madame, gambling is a man's game, not a woman's. To allow a woman to gamble is like giving matches and gunpowder to a child to play with. Unfortunately, most women gamble, but a lady—— What brought you here?"

She had buried her face in her hands.

Raveau ceased speaking.

"Oh, I cannot," she moaned. "Oh, please don't ask me."

"Come," said Raveau, "you can trust me. It will be a sworn secret between us. There is my hand upon it!"

He held out his open palm to her. She kept her small lace handkerchief to her eyes, and slowly laid her free gloved hand timidly in his own.

"You will tell me now, will you not?"

"My husband is a thief," she breathed, half audibly.

Raveau's hand closed over her own with a sudden grip.

"He could keep the truth from me no longer," she continued brokenly. "Yesterday—yesterday—he—he—told me he had taken a sum which my uncle had intrusted to him for the maintenance of my uncle's château during his absence, and lost it on the Bourse."

"Phew!" exclaimed Raveau, releasing her hand. "How much?"

"Oh, please, if I tell you," she said, searching his eyes, "you will never, never tell?"

"I?" smiled Raveau. "My dear lady, you believe my word, don't you?"

"Well, then—it—it was ten thousand francs."

"Good!" said Raveau. "And you came here alone, hoping to save him before your uncle discovered it. Your husband lost his head—many do—but he promised you he would not kill himself, for he loves you, and so you got him away at last for a day or so in the country."

"Until to-night," she intervened tearfully, wondering how he knew.

"Then we have not much time," exclaimed Raveau. "You told him you were spending the night at your sister's—at your cousin's—it does not matter. You risked leaving your own roof for an entire night. It was the only way, of course, and the person who indicated to you this place—evidently a woman; no man would be fool enough, or cruel enough—ought to have her neck wrung. You began with a capital of two thousand francs—your pin-money, of course."

"Oh! you are wonderful!" she cried. "How *could* you know?"

Raveau smiled. "Little incidents of this kind always happen that way," he said.

"Can't you understand," she went on tensely, "what a woman feels when she learns she is the wife of a thief?"

For a second Raveau's face grew solemn. He caught his breath, but only for a brief second, then with a forced smile he listened to her as she continued.

She did not detect even now in her intensity the peculiar expression that came into his eyes. Again he shook himself out of his reverie. Her words, "the wife of a thief," had struck home.

"And having won with your two thousand francs—for I watched you closely as you were next to me—your gain was eight thousand and sixty francs, and still you played on and lost all."

"It seemed to be as if I was going insane. I had no clear idea of what I had lost or won until I began to lose steadily to the end."

Again she covered her face with her hands, swaying slightly in her chair.

Raveau opened his portfolio, drew out a thick sheaf of bank-notes, separated ten thousand francs from it, laid them quietly on the table, added three louis in gold from his waistcoat pocket, and offered the gold to her upon the bank-notes as graciously as he would have presented her with a saucer and a cup of tea.

"Allow me to save you the annoyance of confessing to your respected uncle, Madame," said he; "that is the sum total of your play to me."

She had uncovered her eyes, and sat staring at the sum before her.

"Oh!" she gasped faintly. "Oh! *Monsieur*!"

"Allow me to change you a louis," said Raveau; "at this hour change is so difficult to get for a taxi."

She had suddenly grown radiant with relief in his presence.

"But, it is really—yours—not mine," she stammered, her breast heaving.

"It was never mine," laughed Raveau; "it belongs to your honorable uncle more than to either of us."

"How can I ever repay you—ever thank you?" she breathed as she put the money in her purse and they rose from the table.

"Will you give me your card, Madame?" ventured Raveau as he drew back her chair.

"With all my heart!" she exclaimed as impulsively as a child.

"Without your heart, Madame," smiled Raveau. "Since it concerns some one I love—I am shortly to be married, and I want you to meet my wife—I think when you explain to your husband he will understand how we have met. Better tell him everything."

"You must bring Madame to tea," she said eagerly as they moved across the polished floor together toward the stairs.

"She is very beautiful—so beautiful, so adorably

beautiful, that you, too, will love her, and so good that you will trust her," declared Raveau.

"I'm sure of that," she smiled sweetly as they descended the stairs to the vestibule.

Not until he had seen her safely in a taxi, lifted her small gloved hand to his lips, and raised his hat as the taxi rolled away, did he glance intently at her card and address.

"Vicomtesse René de Villier-Canet!" he exclaimed with a smile of surprise. "Strange, is it not, how so many of the nobility have joined our ranks, and how easy it is for some of us to join the aristocracy. They are not rich, that is certain. They love each other; they will love each other to distraction. Good lesson for the little viscount, poor little woman—just the kind of a poor little woman I want Babette to meet." He swung off down in the direction of the Church of the Trinité with his portfolio full of money and his heart full of joy.

At ten o'clock that morning he placed fifty thousand francs for safekeeping in a bank in the rue Lafitte under the assumed name of Mr. Paul R. Olliver. At one o'clock he took the express for Tours, but not alone. His "brother" was with him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

VIVE les mariés!"

Weddings usually enliven La Fourche to half a holiday. The entire population of the dull little village awaits to see the bride. Babette's wedding treated La Fourche to a whole fête day.

Even the day itself was a rare one: the sky blue, the air clear and soft, and the sunshine everywhere.

Ah! the little weddings of La Fourche!

Silk hats which for years have, like the dress suits of decent black, served as well at funerals, are brought forth and carefully wiped to a lustre. Starched frilled shirts appear, and standing collars choking their sun-tanned wearers, and white cotton gloves pulled over hands hardened by toil. The women wear their best black silk, their ruddy peasant cheeks scrubbed with soap and water until they shine. The men are shaven to the raw. There are laughing groups in the streets, and every one is hot and perspiring. Upon such festivals as these the cafés do a thriving trade, and young girls, seeing the bridegroom pass, reconsider their sweethearts.

Vive les mariés!"

And so at ten o'clock this glorious Monday morning the big gate of the prison opened amid cheers,

and Babette, looking like a tea-rose in a cloud of tulle, a wreath of orange blossoms in her fair hair, radiant and blushing in her simple white dress, made in the village, with her small gloved hand tucked under her father's arm, moved out of the prison gate, followed by Raveau and Madame Poulet, the Père Biot and Madame Jacmin, Monsieur Davos and Mademoiselle Caniveau, the Père Lefèvre and Madame Lefèvre, Mademoiselle Bolbeauf and "Paul Raveau" (Raveau's "brother"), also an aunt of Monsieur Pivot's and the Père Ballu, two little girls dressed in blue, fat Madame Martin and a sister of Madame Poulet's, the Mère Truchard and the Père Malet.

They made quite an imposing little procession as they moved down the green road to the village and turned to the right through a crooked street en route to the civil ceremony at the mayor's.

"Vive les mariés!" shouted all La Fourche, following the bridal party, which, according to custom at La Fourche, were saluted by blank volleys from a dozen shotguns, and heavy charges of powder fired from old muzzle-loaders into empty wine casks. The racket was deafening. Babette's small pink ears rang, though she smiled bravely through the smoke and roar. Some of the women had put cotton in their ears. Another solid volley from the guns, and they passed into the mayor's office, the crowd waiting outside during the brief civil ceremony, and so on to the church, where they were again married by the curé; and so on to the wedding breakfast at the Cerf Noir.

It had all passed like a dream to Babette. She was now Madame Pierre Raveau; it seemed to her hardly possible to believe, but it was really true. Both the mayor and the curé had said so, and the kitchen at the Cerf Noir was full of smoking, sizzling good things, baking, frying, and broiling. It was also lively with hurrying maids. Madame Poulet had already removed her black bead bonnet, and was busy between the kitchen and the wine cellar. The old courtyard was crowded with big two-wheel carts, for several of the guests had come from neighbouring villages. The chickens pecked for stray oats among the shadows cast by the huge spokes of the wheels. The dining-room hummed with congratulations. The long table with its spotless cloth, and its comfortable plain service, looked inviting enough. Every glass shone, every knife gleamed, every one was as hungry as a wolf.

"Allons, mes enfants, à table!" cried Monsieur Pivot, raising his glass of good Vouvray, a wine as golden as Babette's hair and born but a few kilometres from Tours.

"Long live the married ones!" they continued to shout from without.

Chairs were drawn back from places. The company were seated, napkins tucked in necks. The wedding breakfast had begun.

Monsieur Pivot was doubly happy. Not only did his chances for mayor seem favourable, but Raveau's "brother" had decided to remain in La Fourche to

conduct the new inn. Both these secrets warmed Monsieur Pivot's heart to overflowing. The mayorship was a strong possibility; the question of the inn a foregone conclusion, Raveau having made the day before the first payment upon the Père Grandville's property. All said and done, no one was happier than "Paul Raveau." He saw before him a safe refuge from the police in his declining years—Paul Raveau, alias "Martin," alias "Dubois," turned boniface! It amused him. He was gay enough at this jolly breakfast. This heavy-shouldered man with his curly brown hair and black eyes, whom you would have taken for a respectable drummer fond of gayety.

Babette's small ungloved hand lay beneath the white tablecloth in Raveau's. Every one was talking to her at once, so she could only steal a second now and then to whisper in his ear that she loved him. It was a secret between them, one which had to be repeated constantly. Never was there such a day. She felt like some fairy queen. Her husband was the most important person in the world, and she the happiest. To be as happy as Babette is to give forth a certain radiance. Her presence at the end of the table seemed to illumine the room. Presently she removed her veil, very carefully so as not to tear it. She could thus lean closer to Raveau. Now and then he raised his polite eyes and scanned the room full of red, perspiring guests. He had a cheery word for every one, and had grown immensely popular at La

Fourche. Pop! went another cork—and pop! another. And why not? Parbleau! What is a wedding for, sapristi! if it is not to eat, drink, and be merry at? When you see two as happy as they, raise your glass to them, I say. Let her bless you with a smile. She is a holy thing to see. Give thanks that you are among those chosen to be near at this moment. Adore her from the distance between you. Whisper sincere compliments in her warm little ear when you dance with her. Be gallant, be merry and gay above all things. It is not every day there is a wedding. They were the first to love each other as they have loved! Ask Babette. All other loves that ever existed have been commonplace in comparison. How could it be otherwise, since there never was one like Raveau? To love is to reach the pinnacle of living. Love is everything. A wedding is only the culmination of love. Drink to them, shower them with compliments and congratulations. Do not tell her she is pretty—tell her she is *divine*. She is not yours, my friend. She belongs to the one sitting next to her. When you kissed her rosy cheek after the ceremony she did not feel it, neither does she hear you now, though the rest are cheering with bravos your little speech. Love is the thing. When you love, love like the devil. Do not let there be any halfway about it—love to distraction. And as you sit there among this merry company, let every long sip of wine wish her happiness, long life, and health.

“Vive les mariés!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SHE had danced half the night before—danced with enthusiasm, as a peasant girl will—danced with her generous young heart open to her friends, as every “bonne fille” of a peasant girl should dance at her wedding. Her tiny white satin slippers could never be worn again. But when she danced twice with her husband, and the room cheered, Babette blushed—that is, she inwardly blushed—for her cheeks were so rosy through it all that only she was conscious that she blushed. When a girl blushes, she generally drops her head, and Babette in the schottische dropped her head upon Raveau’s shoulder, and whispered in his ear as they turned and turned, “I love you!”

Every little while, during stolen moments that day, she had whispered the same words to him, “I love you!” (“Je t’aime—je t’aime—Ah! comme je t’aime mon chéri. Tu sais bien que je t’aime.”)

What else had she to say, since those words, with their variations and repetitions, said everything? They were no longer fiancés. She belonged to him, and in her young heart she mocked mischievously the whole world beyond them.

Marriage is often like a drug. It delights and

blinds. They whispered like two little thieves together. They plotted together in love. Everything was a secret between them, which they did not trust even Cupid to overhear, having got rid of his services. "Ah! mon Dieu!" But it was like that, nevertheless, just as I tell you.

"Listen!" she whispered. "We shall dance the last together. Eh?"

It was again a secret.

"Vive les mariés!" shouted the rest. And so it kept on.

Not a chicken got a wink of sleep in the courtyard. The cows in the stable grew restless. The horses, haltered before strange mangers, turned their heads in the direction of the noisy, lighted hall, rolled their dear, kind eyes, and stamped in their stalls.

A cock crew, restless from the hubbub of the music and the swishing feet.

Madame Poulet had not danced "in years," she said (out of breath). This was not quite true, since there had been three wedding parties at the Cerf Noir in the last five years; and the "Cat," who was not invited, gazed in at the merriment; he was hid in a shadow, a safe distance from the window, against the moving elbow of Javarde, the carter, who was drunk, and with his gaunt hand on the shoulder of Barbouche, who was nearly so, but not quite.

"Vive les mariés!" the three shouted hoarsely from the shadow, while the "Cat" steadied them both,

and mumbled in Javarde's ear his appreciation of the bride and groom.

She had danced half the night before, and here was another dawn!—a dawn when as she peered down into the courtyard of the Cerf Noir from their bedroom window, she saw the remnants of the wedding. The Père Caniveau was already harnessing his horse. The Père Caniveau was *really* a remnant. He was expostulating with the valet de chambre as he tried to put the heavy black collar, wrong side up, on the mare's neck—(and it hurt her ears)—that his father—*whoa!*—not his father, but his grandfather, on his mother's side—*whoa!* Eh bien! my girl! Ah, I know thee—thou—stubborn-head! . . . not on his farm, but on his grandfather's, before his great-uncle bought the big field, before he met his great-aunt, *whoa!* Ah, sacré bon sang! de bon sang! *whoa!*—that his grandfather killed forty hares in a single day! “I swear by the head of my mother what I tell is true. Forty hares in a single day. Ask my Uncle Jules. You know my Uncle Jules? The big one. Ask my Uncle Jules or the Père Pinet. He was with him, my ancient—— Tenez! the last one doubled back of the barn in the field of the Widow Valant—Pong!—et voilà!—he weighed eight pounds—a monster, killed at eighty metres!” he gasped, and steadying himself against the mare's flank, he caught sight of the bride.

“Bonjour, Madame!” he called up, waving his hat to her.

Babette closed the window abruptly; she had, in fact, only been peeping out.

She had danced half the night, and here was another dawn, and she did not yet realize that she was tired.

Babette, who all her young life had been naturally shy, laughed and smiled a great deal this morning after her wedding. It had all been like a dream to her, and the dream still continued. She was still under that spell of excitement when she was not wholly conscious of what she said to others, or when she laughed, or smiled, and her cheeks were still rosy when those of the wedding party who had remained in La Fourche, and half the village, crowded about the entrance of the Cerf Noir to bid her good-bye. Only when she bade the Mère Truchard good-bye, and her father, were the rosy cheeks glistening, and her blue eyes wet with tears. The Mère Truchard, who had been nurse and mother to her, was crying, but Monsieur Pivot, a little worn and haggard from the events of the day before, proved himself the soldier, though it went hard with him, every one could see that, even the toothless old women on the outskirts of the group, craning their corded necks.

"Ah!" exclaimed Monsieur Pivot, taking his daughter briskly again in his arms. "Au revoir, my little rabbit. I'll see you soon, eh?" he put in encouragingly between the kisses. Then, turning, he embraced Raveau on both cheeks, after the custom of his country, and shook him heartily by both hands.

There was a taxi, that Raveau had sent for from Tours, in readiness. Madame Poulet embraced Babette, but Eméline Davos did not. It was a little strange à propos of the dream. Eméline was a little stupid—a short, black-eyed girl, slow to decide in her affections. They shook hands, however, and Eméline said in her stupid voice:

“Au revoir, Babette, and bon voyage.”

It was Monsieur Pivot who opened the door of the taxi and saw them safe inside.

It had begun to rain. Raveau pulled up both windows, glanced at his watch, and signed to the chauffeur to leave.

All the group of old friends had kissed her—whom you may be sure profited soundly by the occasion to kiss the bride—and as the chauffeur cranked and sprang to his seat, Babette waved her small gloved hand, the free one, the other being in Raveau's. Then the window next to her suddenly dropped with the vibration of the motor in readiness.

A tall, lank figure leaped forward from the group. It was the “Cat.”

“Bon voyage, Mam'selle Babette,” he said awkwardly, and stretched forth his gaunt brown hand.

Babette shook it. Raveau leaned forward and shook it, for the hand was insistent, and the reverence in the “Cat's” eyes for the bride and groom was apparent. The next instant the “Cat” quickly raised the fallen sash and set it back in its frame.

“Long live the married ones!” they cheered.

Babette, her eyes upon her father, waved again.

"Long live the married ones!" they cried, as the taxi whined, and growled, away from the Cerf Noir, out through the crooked village.

"Long live the married ones!" The voices grew faint.

Babette caught sight of the stark old prison, towering above the trees. It seemed to say good-bye to the child it had sheltered and set free, for through the mist of her tears, the rocking of the taxi, and the rain, the old towers stark upon the great rock appeared to sway and nod to her as the taxi rushed on.

Houses we love and leave seem in their silent way to say good-bye to us at times.

It was pouring in torrents.

The taxi forged ahead, rocking and splashing through the pools in the road. Raveau gathered her close in his arms, drawing her head down with his free hand, until he nestled it against his shoulder. He whispered something in her warm little ear, and for a long while neither spoke, but twice she strained up her head and pressed her lips to his cheek.

"You will crush your hat," said he. She took it off—a simple dark-blue travelling toque to match her new dark-blue tailor-made, and laying it upon her knees, nestled closer to him, and long before they reached Tours she was fast asleep.

"Babette!" he said, patting her cheek as they entered the city. She awoke with a start, brushing back her damp blond hair from her temples.

Babette had never been in a taxi, and only twice in a train, when her father took her when a little girl to the fair at Blois.

As the express for Paris rolled into the big station at Tours, they found by luck a first-class compartment to themselves. That is to say, a young lieutenant, its only occupant, and seated next to the window flanking the corridor, stared discreetly at them during the intervals when he turned the pages of the *Figaro*, made up his mind he was right, and left them to themselves.

"Do not disturb yourself, Monsieur," Raveau graciously protested as the young officer quietly rose and reached for his valise and sword in the netted rack above his seat.

The young lieutenant bowed, and explained that he had just caught sight of his cousin searching for a compartment ahead. His cousin was in the dragoons, their regiments were separated—alors! naturally.

"Do not derange yourself, I pray you, Monsieur," intervened Madame Raveau, which was a very brave little speech for one so newly married, considering her age and her agitation, and which her husband was inwardly proud of, since it was delivered with a nod, a smile, and considerable *savoir faire*. Raveau was on his feet now, bowing to the correct salute of the one who had guessed the truth.

Babette bowed, too, again a charming little nod, which the officer returned with a low bow, and the single word "Madame," and took his leave.

They were alone.

It was as if Cupid, who it is said looks safely after his clients until they are snug aboard the train, had been hovering around, and mysteriously impressed the intruder that the compartment was "reserved."

An hour later the express slipped under the shed at Orléans and came to a stop.

Raveau had left Babette asleep, and was smoking a cigarette in the corridor, when his quick eyes caught sight of a gray-haired, square-shouldered man in the clamouring crowd making his way to the car ahead.

Raveau glanced back at Babette, saw that she was still asleep, turned his back on the crowd, and passing the open window he had been standing by, slowly hunched his shoulders, and as slowly slipped along the corridor to the end of the car. Here a jog in the corridor and the blind end of a mail car hid from him the view of the passing throng on the platform.

Not until the express was about to proceed did he turn. Edging to the platform door, its glass grimy with soot and rain, again he searched over the moving crowd on the platform. The gray-haired man was not there. Had he gone ahead? Had he left the station? Had he seen him? He was certain of none of these rapid conjectures. Quick as a flash, he dropped the first rain-smeared window of the corridor and searched ahead up the platform, and he saw him, standing in his black overcoat, lifting his derby hat to a woman leaning well out of the window two cars

ahead—a very pretty woman, too, in a black velvet hat with a white aigrette.

Raveau abruptly shut the window, again turned his back, and, standing immovable, watched for his man as the express slipped out of the station.

They passed each other. He was still lifting his hat to the woman as the train moved out toward the yards—this man whom he had feared for years, for reasons best known to himself, this man who more than once had shadowed him, ever since an old affair along the Riviera—a man who prided himself upon his ability to rake up old scores, a man who was celebrated and known, throughout Continental Europe, for his cleverness in laying his hand on the past when it was necessary.

It was Guignard, Sous-chef of the Secret Police of Paris.

Only when the express had cleared the yards, tar-getted with those white and green signals which mean life or death to engineers, did he walk calmly up the corridor, glance in at his wife, saw that she was still asleep, stole in on tip-toe, bent over her, lightly kissed her blond hair, and, returning to the open window of the corridor, lighted a fresh cigarette, and, with a deep breath, gazed out upon the soft green fields of Tourraine.

There is a song humming beneath every train: voices—rhythmic choruses—the syncopation and harmony caused by the regular beat, beat, beat over the “sleepers,” and as an express increases its

speed, the music drones and swells and throbs in one's ears. Composers know this. The great Saint-Saens often got his inspiration for a motif, a theme, a ballet even, on trains. Telegraph wires set humming, singing, moaning, by the wind, produce faintly this strange phenomena. The train is stronger. It is a giant in strength. It gives you the whole orchestra.

As the undulating green fields and the brown rectangles of freshly ploughed land rolled by him, Raveau hummed to himself. Humming, he accompanied this invisible orchestra that to-day caressed his senses, for he was happy. He felt at that moment a strange elevation of soul. As the speed increased, the music, droning in his ears, rose to an apotheosis. Raveau loved music. He often went to church for the music alone. Good heavens! do you suppose I am writing about a man whom I do not *know*?

It was dark when they reached Paris. Babette was wide awake now, as the express roared through the stuffy tunnel under the Seine, lighted by bull-eyes, and which grades up the underground tracks into the big station of the Quai d'Orsay. The bustle, the endless moving crowd, the hurrying porters, shouting out, "Attention s'il vous plait!" as they wheeled along the baggage trucks to the elevator, careful of feminine ankles, of children, of robes, of expensive furs, of important-looking gentlemen in the way, who turned to glare or expostulate. All were new to her. Then up the iron stairs to the

magnificent waiting-room above. A palace to Babette! She clung to Raveau's arm. It was like a fair. The rattle of plated silver in the brilliantly lighted restaurant; the booted and legged hunters with their pointers and setters, beagles and spaniels, hurrying to the express for Sologne to shoot—all were a revelation to her.

"Is it not wonderful!" she whispered in Raveau's ear. "Oh! is it not wonderful, my dearest!" she exclaimed, gazing up at the frescoed panels depicting the perfect climate and rich bounties of Pau, Biarritz, and San Sebastian.

"Let us see it all," she pleaded, and he laughed.

"It is a fête day," she decided to herself, and insisted on sitting down on the nearest bench.

"My dear little Babette," protested Raveau, "we must be going. I must attend to our trunks."

"Oh! let me stay a minute—just a minute, my beloved," she begged, "it is so beautiful."

Raveau laughed outright.

"Babette, you are truly adorable. Very well, sit here, then. Do not move until I come back. I must tell the customs we have nothing to declare."

The lieutenant passed them, again saluting. Raveau raised his hat, summoned a porter, and went off to attend to their baggage.

The lieutenant stopped, and discreetly looked back, half crossed the vast floor, and again stopped.

"Ah! what a pretty little girl—what a pretty little girl!" he said to himself, and for some moments he

stood there watching Babette, while she gazed about her in wonder, like a child at the theatre.

Presently Raveau returned.

"Look, my dearest!" she exclaimed, pointing to the frescoe of Tourraine. "It is not like that," she added seriously, with an expression in her frank blue eyes as if some one had told her an untruth.

It was indeed not at all like that. There was the blue sky, the green fields, the tall feathery poplar trees, and the swinging river, but the nymphs loaded with bunches of grapes, rollicking en route to the wine-presses of Vouvary, she had never seen, even in her wildest dreams.

She followed him out to the taxi.

Her first glimpse of Paris!

"The Seine," he explained to her as they crossed the bridge, the black water sweeping beneath its cold surface, wriggling in ribbons of multicoloured lights to-night.

He pointed to the closed gardens of the Tuilleries. She looked out hard at the trees.

"Oh! but it's pretty!" she cried, as they swung into the Place de la Concorde glittering in lights. They halted, crawled on, and halted, blocked in the six o'clock mass of vehicles in the rue Royale.

"Oh! but its wonderful!" she exclaimed, looking out at the fairyland of dazzling shop windows and smart equipages. Then it was dark again as they turned the corner of the Madeleine.

She gazed up at the giant columns with their colos-

sal Corinthian capitals, silent as a mountain—majestic.

“What is that?” she asked breathlessly.

“The Madeleine,” he said, kissing her. “It is a church, an idea of Napoleon’s.”

“Ah! good!” she replied, seeming to remember, and not having been quite sure it was not a prison.

They rattled on through the wide and badly lighted Boulevard Malesherbes, passed St. Augustin, turned to the left into the rue Miromesnil, a quiet street, and stopped at a small hotel—the Hotel du Cygne. The aproned valet de chambre, standing in the modest entrance with his wife, the femme de chambre, a buxom black-eyed woman from Arles, opened the door of the taxi for them.

Their wedding voyage was over.

At that moment another taxi growled up to the door, and a thin, elderly gentleman with an umbrella got out, and told the chauffeur to wait. As he entered, Raveau, who had left Babette in the small salon next to the office, was engaged in conversation with the proprietor over the price of his best room. The elderly gentleman, whose manner was timid, and who seemed to be in a hurry, stood discreetly back of Raveau.

“One moment, Monsieur,” apologized the proprietor.

Raveau turned.

“I am in no hurry,” he said politely to the gentleman twenty years his senior.

"Continue, I pray you, Monsieur," insisted the elderly one over his shoulder.

"You shall see the room, Monsieur," continued the proprietor. "It has been free only since yesterday. Gaston!"—and he beckoned to the valet de chambre—"show number four to Monsieur."

The elderly gentleman awkwardly dropped his umbrella. Raveau, despite his protestations, stooped and, picking it up, handed it to its owner.

"You are a thousand times amiable," returned the stranger. "Thank you, Monsieur."

Then Raveau raised his eyes to Babette, and the two followed the valet de chambre up the narrow winding stairs.

"Now, Monsieur," said the proprietor to the elderly gentleman, "I am entirely at your disposition."

"It is a question of my sister and my niece," began the old gentleman timidly; "two ladies alone, you understand, and of modest means."

"Perfectly," returned the proprietor, eager with interest.

They talked on.

"It is, however, not for the present week," explained the stranger, "but for the week to come. Possibly you could make them a special rate with pension. They will be with you, let us say, a full month."

"Monsieur and Madame are pleased with the room," announced the valet de chambre, leaning over the banisters.

The proprietor nodded.

"It is as you wish, then, Monsieur," he resumed to the elderly one, "at the price we have agreed upon. Then it is understood that you will let me know in a day or so, Monsieur, the date of Madame your sister's arrival."

"It is understood, Monsieur," returned the elderly gentleman, opening his umbrella, as it had begun to drizzle. "Bon soir, Monsieur!" And he reëntered his taxi and was gone.

At the post-office, on the corner of the rue de l'Arcade, he sent the following telegram in reply to Guignard's dispatch that afternoon from Orléans.

"Located Raveau, alias Ravin, on arrival. Both stopping Hôtel du Cygne, rue Meromesnil. Await further orders.

[Signed]

"DUPONT."

Then he returned to his desk at Police Headquarters, and hurriedly opened his late mail.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IT WAS lonely enough in the prison without Babette. The lark had flown. There was nothing left in her cage but her small iron bedstead, stripped now even of its comforting patchwork quilt, stripped to its bare mattress, upon which Monsieur Pivot had laid out the day after the wedding a series of old prison reports, which he fully intended some day to have bound.

"No, he was not lonely," he told himself; he was happy. He was proud of his son-in-law, of his little rabbit's happiness, but all his pride and happiness struggled up through his soldierly chest past a lump in his throat whenever he entered the lark's cage, and bravely glanced around him at the bare little washstand, and more than once before he gently closed the door he glanced up at the silver crucifix and crossed himself. He had seen his two loved ones go from that empty little room: his wife and his daughter. It was the same crucifix, and the same methodical old clock in the antechamber had ticked on through both events. No one could be wholly alone with such an honest old clock as Monsieur Pivot's. Its face, with its scene of the river, was homely enough, and Babette was no longer there to wipe it, or wind it

up, or dust its fine mahogany sides. The Mère Truchard attended to it now, and it tick-tocked on methodically for Monsieur Pivot's benefit and comfort.

There is good company in a clock. It has a personality which seems alive and gives life to a room. No one can deny its importance, since all human life moves with it. Its crawling hands hold sway over us through hope, joy, and despair. They mark our coming into the world and our going out of it; they give pardon to the criminal, or crawl to the minute of his execution; they indicate the hour of rendezvous for lovers; dictate to debtors, priests, travellers, thieves, paupers, and millionaires; they signal the hour of robbery, of assassination, of great events, of love, ruin, of peace and prosperity. Time is both a tyrant and a good friend. It can be as kind as a kiss and as cruel as a despot.

Whenever Monsieur Pivot entered his home the methodical tick-tock of the clock against the wall gave him welcome, even though it wheezed rustily when it struck the hour.

Daily the Mère Truchard entered the gate between milking times to do what little housework there was, and to cook his déjeuner and his dinner. Alas! for a week he had not had a single prisoner, save that ex-convict Barbouche, who came every day or so to help him get the tidy garden ready for the winter. Together they manured well the garden,

blanketing the base of the rosebushes with straw, cutting here and trimming there. Not for him, you may well believe, but that both might be complimented for their work by Babette on her return—that vague day which had not been settled upon yet, but which her father believed would be early in the spring. He, of course, would go to Paris many times, he told himself, before that. All this Babette had mentioned in her letters, and she wrote him regularly twice a week—long, enthusiastic letters, of the wonder of Paris, of her love, of her happiness. The inside pocket of his military coat contained them all. They were getting to be such a thick packet that it is doubtful if Monsieur Pivot could have passed inspection by the most lenient of officers. The blue coat bulged over his heart.

Happily Monsieur Pivot had his coming candidature for mayor to interest him. This, and his daily interest in the installation of the new inn with Raveau's "brother" Paul, as director, lightened his loneliness—Raveau's "brother" Paul, alias "Emile Berthron," alias "Barthou," and twice imprisoned for forgery under his real name, Gaston Pantin.

Pantin could have wished nothing better in life than La Fourche as a refuge, off the beaten track of the police, with Raveau's money to start the enterprise. All in all, he considered himself lucky. Moreover, Pantin was fifty-five, and had grown weary of the old game: its continued risks, and its restless life. He, like many criminals of his class, was getting to the

age when he wished to settle down. This man, whom you might have taken for a genial drummer, took things calmly, and talked and moved with that slow deliberation which some men affect who are used to acting like lightning where in a close corner.

Raveau and he had been old pals for years, and though nothing could have tempted Raveau to turn innkeeper, he had been quick to think of his old friend Pantin. They had met in the Sans Souci by appointment the day of Raveau's return to Paris, where Raveau enlightened him with the news of his coming wedding, the wisdom of having a "brother" present, and his promise to Monsieur Pivot à propos of the new inn. Thus he had offered him the job, knowing Pantin was eager for a safe and quiet life.

As Raveau's "brother," Pantin's popularity in La Fourche was already assured. They talked of proposing him for municipal counselor. This man who was not only a clever forger, but had more than once in his life eluded the police for counterfeiting, was known in the profession for his skill in imitating a five-franc piece. It was his specialty. By a process known to himself, he avoided the greasy feel of the commoner lead ones, and preserved the ring when struck, and the weight. Unlike most counterfeiters, he worked alone, and never with a band, passing most of his coins in Belgium and Holland. Therefore there was no danger of his getting bad change in his inn, and it must be said to his credit that he issued none in return. We might almost say

by so doing he protected the honour of the family and the good name of La Fourche.

Pantin's haven of rest, for which he was indebted to Raveau, stood midway between the market-place and the Cerf Noir. It was a long, old-fashioned, low, two-story house, built entirely of stone, and painted white, with a courtyard twice as big as that of Madame Poulet's, and having left its name to the imagination of Monsieur Pivot, that gentleman ransacked his brain for days before hitting upon a suitable title for the new hostellerie.

"Ah!" cried Monsieur Pivot one bright Monday morning. "I have it, my friend! Listen! Since we have the Boudoir Cell of Mélice d'Anjou, and the dungeon of the Duc de Taragon, let us call it, 'The Grand Hotel of Mélice d'Anjou and the Duc de Taragon Reunited.' What think you, my good Pantin? Elegant, you see, with a touch of history which will incite strangers to visit the prison."

"Excellent, my good Pivot! excellent and grandiose! I could never have thought of it myself."

"In gold letters," added Monsieur Pivot triumphantly.

"Like this, for instance," smiled Pantin, and, seizing a blue pencil, he rapidly sketched out upon the back of a roll of wall paper the long sign with so much ease and precision in the spacing and detail of the letters that Monsieur Pivot, craning his neck over his shoulder in the small office of the new hostellerie, exclaimed in astonishment:

"Sapristi! but you are strong at it! You have, like your brother, the trick of drawing at your fingers' ends. One must have the gift to do that, eh?"

"I learned it at school," slowly declared the veteran counterfeiter, sweeping in a "J" with the precision of a professional letterer.

In less than ten days the long, resplendent sign was up. It ran nearly the entire length of the rambling façade over its arched entrance.

If the house itself was old, everything in it was as new as varnish and paint could make it. The dining-room in bird's-egg blue, the office in imitation cherry, with a magenta velvet rope leading up the main stairway—nothing had been neglected within reason that Monsieur Pivot in his enthusiasm could suggest, even to the modern cement pit in the garage and the artificial palms. As for the sign, they both agreed that it would tempt any chauffeur of the rich Americans to recommend "The Grand Hotel of Mélice d'Anjou and the Duc de Taragon Reunited" on first sight. The very entrance itself under the arched porte-cochère was inviting. It glistened in signs relative to non-puncture tires, Benedictine, and other lubricating oils. It contained also, in two large frames, photographs of the prison, in which Monsieur Pivot's soldierly little figure could be seen standing trim in the foreground in nearly all of them.

The Grand Hotel being installed, Pantin settled

down to receive his guests, as used to his smile and the traditional napkin tucked under his arm as a boniface twenty years in the business.

Alas! the guests, save for a few chance parties in automobiles for luncheon, en route to Tours, were few and far between.

It mattered little to Pantin. He had not a franc's worth of his own in the enterprise, and was grateful enough not to have made his début as a hotelkeeper during a rush season. He kept down the running expenses to the minimum, and looked forward to a restful winter. At the present moment La Fourche suited him to perfection. Nothing could have pleased him better than to be at his ease and esteemed in the old village. The lazy, safe life, the genial welcome that greeted him wherever he went, all these amused and satisfied him, as he wrote to Raveau:

"The initial expense in mounting this opera bouffe is done. We shall fill the house easily later—in the spring." Which was true.

Whereas, Monsieur Pivot, who had not a sou's worth in the enterprise, could ill disguise his nervous anxiety over the lack of guests, despite the lateness of the season.

Sitting, as he did daily for hours often in the cherry-coloured office, with his now boon companion, Pantin, the slightest sound without resembling an automobile would cause him to start in his chair, if it did not bring him to the entrance to search up and down the main street, to convince himself he was wrong.

From the very beginning Monsieur Pivot had been confident that the moment everything was in readiness and the doors of the Grand Hotel de Mélice d'Anjou and her noble consort were thrown open to the passing public, the till would be filled with gold louis and crisp bank-notes. Monsieur Pivot's imagination was enormous when it touched upon prosperity.

"They have not come yet, I grant you," he declared to Pantin to-day. "It is also late in the season. The days are growing short, the leaves are falling; but wait, my good friend, you shall see—my son-in-law will be rich—we shall all be comfortably off. It is not possible, I tell you, that it could be otherwise. When you compare Madame Poulet's to this! Ah! you shall see! You shall see, my friend! *Our* prices are naturally high, but is it not just that they should be? For luxury one must keep one's hand in one's pocket continually. No counting the sous then, eh? One pays with the free hand of a prince, not with the claw of a miser; but one receives—aye, one receives in turn."

"Money is harder to make than you suppose," Pantin returned, with his slow smile, always amused over Pivot's enthusiasm. "When you consider how hard it is to make a five-franc piece——" A remark which Monsieur Pivot naturally misconstrued. And as he said it the fat postman, Monsieur Dubeck, opened the door.

"Bon jour, Messieurs!" said he, breathing heavily

as he waddled toward the office desk. "It is that I have the good fortune to find you here, Monsieur Pivot. It will save me the hill," and opening the leather box strapped over his paunch, he handed Monsieur Pivot a letter.

Pantin rose to offer Monsieur Dubeck a glass of wine.

. "Ah! the good luck!" exclaimed Monsieur Pivot, hastily tearing open the envelope.

It was from Babette:

MY DEAR FATHER:

First I must kiss you. Do you know what we are going to do? No, of course not. Very well, I shall tell you. You shall see how fine it will be. My husband has told me all about it, for he said to me a wife should know what her husband does, even in the big affairs. You see how he loves me. He tells me everything, father. When one loves *well*, there are no secrets. He is so dear. Do you know, he is growing handsomer daily? His eyes are beautiful. When I think he is my own—ah! you do not know how happy we are—one has the right to be proud, eh? Very well, let me explain, then you will understand. We are no longer at the Hotel de Moscou. My husband was not satisfied. It gave upon a little street, and when it rained and my husband was away, it made me very sad; besides, the hotel was dirty. Last Thursday we moved to the "Sans Souci," where my husband has many friends. Every one seems to know him there, my father. It is very nice, the "Sans Souci," and Madame, the proprietress, is so good to me. It is the fifth hotel we have been to since we arrived in Paris, but I like it better than all the rest, since the life there passes much more *en famille*. One feels at home. Every one is so kind to me. When my husband is away, during the day, I lunch with Madame. We have the best room. Now I must tell you what my husband is going to do.

On the rue Lafayette there is a grand café filled with gentlemen who sell jewels on commission. Ah! you should see that. It is wonderful. Most of them are foreign gentlemen. It is so amusing, their language. Some are gentlemen from Greece, some from Poland, and there are, besides, other gentlemen from Armenia and Persia. You see, I know it all; my husband took me there. Tell me, do you like diamonds? They are so beautiful, every one should like them. They have them in little tissue-papers, these gentlemen. It is so funny to see things so valuable wrapped up in tissue-papers.

Very well, Pierre is going to be a "courtier" in precious stones. We shall all be very rich some day. Pierre explained it all to me. He is very wise, father. Do you know that rubies must be judged by candle-light? It is very amusing, and that now they make big rubies by melting little ones. My husband has explained it all to me. They are among themselves there, the foreign gentlemen. Their commerce passes among them, *en famille*. Tell me, my father, what do you wish for your birthday? Send me your military cross. You shall have a diamond in it. It will look very well in the middle of the star. My husband has promised to get one for you——

"Ah, but!" exclaimed Monsieur Pivot. "She thinks of everything, that little one." And half rising from his chair, he turned to shake the postman, Monsieur Dubeck, by the hand, a fat, warm hand by this time, pulsating with more than one glass of Pantin's best Vouvray.

"Au revoir!" said Pantin cheerfully to the postman.

"Au revoir, Monsieur Dubeck," said Monsieur Pivot, as that functionary was about to take his leave; "and thank you for my letter."

"It is nothing," exclaimed Dubeck, adjusting the strap to his letter-box once more about his red neck. "Ah!" he sighed, "I must be going. One must not be late with the mail. It displeases; besides, I do my duty. Imagine, the Mère Bonnet angry, all because the other day I had a letter for her in the early morning and did not deliver it until noon. It was a day," gulped Monsieur Dubeck, "when I was overcharged with business. That is what I say, Messieurs—the government overloads us with its affairs." He slipped the strap off his puffy neck again and sat down in the empty chair next to Monsieur Pivot, by the stove.

"Another drop?" smiled Pantin, still standing.

"Eh? all right, it is as you wish, my good Monsieur. Then I must be going. Imagine the Mère Bonnet furious. You know where she lives, in the little house beyond the Mère Fouquet's. It is a piece of road that—besides, it was dog's weather—my hood and cloak were soaked through. Is it that we are expected to accomplish everything—— Parbleu! No, I say no! There is a limit to one's good-will. To one's (hup!) interest. Aye! aye! that will do," protested Monsieur Dubeck as Pantin refilled his glass, not forgetting, you may be sure, that of Monsieur Pivot and his own. "A limit to one's endurance, Messieurs," continued Monsieur Dubeck thickly.

"Ah!" sighed Monsieur Pivot, "when one does one's duty, that is the principal thing. We are, after



all, only the modest ones in life, the little ones. We do our best, nevertheless. They can never say of me that I have not done my duty, for I have."

"You have reason to say so," intervened Pantin grimly, still standing with his back to the stove. "All La Fourche is proud of you, and I am not ashamed to say it."

Monsieur Pivot jerked his head in an abashed sort of way to one side and broke out in an embarrassed laugh.

"For it is the truth," went on Pantin.

"To your health!" cried Monsieur Dubeck.

"And to yours, my old one!" exclaimed Monsieur Pivot, touching in turn the rims of the others' glasses with his own.

"And your daughter?" inquired Monsieur Dubeck, as best he could, for he was growing slowly purple.

They again touched glasses.

"To the health of Madame Raveau!" proposed Pantin calmly.

"Ah! my good friends!" exclaimed Pivot, setting down his empty glass slowly on the office desk, "if you have any doubt about two people being happy, let me read you this," and he drew forth from his bulging inner pocket the letter of the morning.

"My dear father," he began again, and continued through the letter, lowering and quickening his voice only when it came to Babette's love and kisses at the end.

"A drop more, Messieurs!" Pantin broke the

silence that for a few seconds ensued, and again the glasses were refilled.

"You will permit me?" ventured Pantin, and took the letter from Monsieur Pivot's hand. Still standing, he read it slowly, and decided that his old pal, Raveau, had more nerve than himself. The café on the rue Lafayette he knew. What puzzled him most was that Raveau could have become a "member" there. "How did he manage it?" he asked himself, as Messieurs Pivot and Dubeck left the Grand Hotel of the unfortunate lady and the fortunate duke together. "How the devil could he?" he mused. "His honesty has been guaranteed by some one—by some jewel firm—*must* have! It's astounding," he exclaimed half aloud, "if he's lied to the kid. No, he hasn't lied. She's crazy about him, but he hasn't lied."

La Fourche and the Grand Hotel and its refuge suddenly became tame to him.

"If we could work together," he told himself, "between us, we could net, with an easy game, a hundred thousand francs a year—clear profit!" And he slammed down the top of the office desk hard, and turned the key in the drawer of the till, with the decision of a man who admires one of his own kind, and blames himself for not helping him.

As for Monsieur Pivot, he left Monsieur Dubeck and his box of tardy mail at the corner opposite the Cerf Noir, which turns up the prison hill. Dubeck was for another glass, but Monsieur Pivot fortunately

refused. Then he walked briskly up the winding road to the prison. As he neared the gate he raised his head and saw the slim figure of a girl lift the latch and let it drop and turn toward him smiling.

It was Babette.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BABETTE rushed into her father's arms. "Ah! it was not so easy," she confided, as Monsieur Pivot hugged his daughter to his heart with four sound kisses on both her pretty cheeks. "It was not easy, but he would have it so," she explained breathlessly. "You've got my letter?" she went on as they entered the prison gate. "He sent me away. Imagine his sending me away! It is now Thursday. Very well, I am to stay with you until Monday. It is on account of the jewellery affair. It is a very important affair. Pierre is so occupied all day and half the night," she explained, as they walked arm in arm through the bare garden, "he wished to give you a surprise."

There were tears in Monsieur Pivot's eyes, but they were tears of joy.

"Sapristi! my little rabbit!" he exclaimed, as he helped Babette off with her warm travelling coat. "But the good God is good to me. When did you mail the letter?"

"On Tuesday," Babette told him, as she took off her hat, and pushed open the door of her bare little room.

"It only reached me this morning," declared her

father, and fumbling in his breast-pocket he saw that it had been stamped at the bureau de poste of the rue Amsterdam Tuesday, and had evidently been in the dilatory care of that functionary, Monsieur Dubeck, during the meantime. When he realized this, Monsieur Pivot swore inwardly and recalled their mutual conversation about duty.

It is useless to try and continue your luck by gambling. The chances are against you from the first. If you succeed to make even a modest living by gambling, it is that you are among the few great exceptions in the world. Everything is against the player, for Chance is no respecter of persons. It treats them badly. It always has, and it always will. There is a sinister fickleness about Chance, the twin sister of Hazard. Those two, who have always been in love with each other, compared with which, Love and Romance are solid, conservative propositions.

Raveau knew this. The wedding, their honeymoon, and the outlay toward the Grand Hotel had eaten heavily into his brilliant winnings that night at baccarat. In spite of this he continued to play, with his old-time skill, unknown to Babette, at the Club des Arts Modernis, winning small sums at odd moments during the day, and finally losing even these. He dared not continue. He had known men to continue that losing game before. He feared to be without money. With Babette now to love and protect and

care for, this thought became like a threatening spectre in his mind.

Gambling is a power. Compared with other vices, its domination over human beings is supreme. It seduces, apologizes, leads the victim on again, plays with joy and depression, desperation and death. The gambler has no heart, no sympathy. He is deaf, dumb, and blind to misery. His agile fingers give and receive with the mechanical gesture of an automaton. If he is sorry for you he does not repay your losses. He cheers you up to further play, to further losses, to ruin, and rises grimly with a heartless nod over your ill-luck. Once born a gambler, you are always a gambler. Other lesser vices take time to acquire. You can begin in the street as a small boy chucking sous, you can end in the gutter at sixty by pursuing roulette, or play higher and blow out your brains over baccarat. Gambling is more seductive than a popular bar, or a woman's kiss.

Like the morphinomaniac, who begins with small doses, increasing them, the gambler begins with small stakes, increasing them to heavy stakes—the great sensation! He plays to the extreme brink; so does the drug fiend. There can be no great sensation without its ensuing depression. Depression is the price we pay for joy. These two extremes are the habitual drug fiend and the gambler's daily fare. Compared to them, to what they enjoy and suffer, the drunkard plays a banal and mediocre rôle.

Man is the only animal who drinks when he is not thirsty. Raveau was never to my knowledge drunk in his life. What he liked best was a good red Bordeaux, and he would often take infinite pains to get it. A criminal who drinks is lost. Raveau was in excellent shape, hard as a nail, and active, with a fresh skin, and eyes with something of the clearness in them that one sees in certain precious stones.

Pantin was right: Raveau's decision to leave the gaming table and become a courtier in jewels was not an easy situation to arrive at.

For a whole day after Babette's departure Raveau walked the streets of Paris, trying to think out a scheme by which he could gain the desired recommendation in the brotherhood from a well-known firm. It was his habit to walk while he was thinking. Often he walked the streets. To-day he strode up from the Sans Souci, passed the Gare St. Lazare, continued up the rue Amsterdam, turned through the Place Clichy, sauntered on up the Boulevard de Clichy, past the Moulin Rouge, gained the steep rue Lepic, lined upon the right-hand side with vegetable and fish carts, wormed his way among the women in bedroom slippers, wrappers, and curl-papers, marketing for the day; crossed the noisy, crowded rue des Abbesses, struck on up the steep hill leading to the Ball of the Moulin-de-la-Galette, and continued on up until he reached the rue des Saules, flanked by garden walls, oozing, leaning,

tottering, dank and winding, until he found himself in the most quiet of village squares, which has the distinction of being the bald spot on the cranium of Paris, under the protecting shadow of the Sacré Coeur.

"There is no way out of it," he said to himself as he sat down on a bench, his hands nervously clenched in the pockets of his overcoat, "I must put the screws on Le Clerc. If he weakens, there will be no harm done either to Le Clerc, the woman, or her husband. If he does not—but he will."

He was talking half aloud to himself, digging into the earth between his feet with the ferule of a malaka stick Babette had given him.

"He won't," he mused. "Yes, he'll give me what I want."

As he was speaking thus softly to himself, the policeman on duty in the modest little square passed in front of him, seemingly noticing the well-dressed gentleman on the bench. They always seem to be noticing those before them. The air was sharp and clear up there this morning, and the policeman's eyes seemed to be idly searching the ground, but were in reality studying Raveau, as it is their daily business to study those before them, cautiously, respectfully, whoever they pass. It was not often he met a well-dressed gentleman, a man of evident wealth and distinction, sitting on that bench talking to himself, absorbed in what he was saying. As he passed, Raveau caught his frank, respectful eye, and

rising gave him the military salute. The policeman instantly halted, flung his hand out of his thick blue cape, returned the salute, and stopped.

"Pardon, Monsieur," smiled Raveau, "but could you be amiable enough to indicate to me if there is a telephone near by?"

"A telephone, Monsieur—perfectly. You see the small café on the corner?"

"Thank you, Monsieur."

"It is nothing," replied the policeman, again touching the brim of his hat.

"It is sharp weather," added Raveau. "Happily the good God does not deprive us of the sun."

"It is sharp! It pinched and stung hard early this morning, I assure you; but what will you have? It is the season. We should not complain."

"I went to the country yesterday," continued Raveau. "There was a white frost in the woods and the edges of the river were frozen."

"Ah!" exclaimed the officer. "I come from the Ardennes. It is my country. My brother wrote me yesterday that the snow in the forest was as thick as my four fingers. We shall have a hard winter."

"It does not surprise me," said Raveau. "You say the telephone is in the little café on the corner?"

"Over there, Monsieur," declared the officer, with a jerk of his chin and a nod in the direction.

"Thank you again, Monsieur."

"At your service, Monsieur," nodded the func-

tionary of police, and with a final exchange of salutes, Raveau took his leave.

"A real gentleman," said the policeman to himself, gazing after him as Raveau crossed the square and entered the café, which was next to a cobbler's, and smelt badly of eau-de-javelle, since it had had that morning, being Saturday, a thorough cleaning.

It was the day when the drummers in absinthe and liqueurs came to the proprietor to place his orders for the week. Three were already leaning over the zinc bar talking business with the proprietor. The drummers in red and white wine appeared regularly Tuesday afternoons. Mondays the proprietor counted up the sold stock in his small cellar and ordered accordingly. It will thus be seen that the café on the corner did an excellent small business; nevertheless, it was known in the argot (the slang of Paris) as a "bistro," since all cafés are graded in their proper categories.

There is, for instance, the Grand Café, the Café-Restaurant, the Café Concert, the "American Bar," the Café-Bar, at modest prices for the working classes. Finally there comes the Bistro, which is sometimes called a "Zinc," since the bar is made of it; sometimes a "buvette" ("a little place where one drinks"). There is a lower grade than this. It is called a "bouge," or a "bognas." This word was evidently invented by that vast multitude of Paris, the critics. Its basis being a question of criticism, its root has naturally to do with displeasure and the ease of saying so.

When one cannot create in life he becomes a critic. It is very simple.

The café on the corner was known then as a "bistro" by the underworld, and by the upper, who seldom entered it, it passed as a café. Its telephone hung over two mops, a pail, and a ham, next to a wash-basin with a worn cake of soap that was always elusive and slimy, and a roll-towel that began clean Monday and was thrown into the wash Wednesday night unrecognizable.

When Raveau opened the door the proprietor, a heavy man in his shirt sleeves, with a dyed beard, said "Bon jour, Monsieur," and added a solemn but suspicious bow. When you handle a "bistro" you must be ready for any one who opens the door. There are no longer left any surprises in Paris. Surprises have become a dull joke of any kind whatsoever. Raveau searched in the fat Directory of Paris, and having found the telephone number of the jewel firm—"Faulçon Mallet fils," 36-84. B—unhooked the receiver. When he put it back, he had invited Le Clerc to luncheon the following day and Le Clerc had accepted.

Le Clerc believed in Raveau with that blind confidence with which we believe in bar acquaintances. Drink easily makes friends; it incites confidences. The two had met by chance a year ago in the smart bar of a smart hotel on the Champs Elysées. When the lemon peel slid to the empty bottom of their third cocktail, Le Clerc had given him his card, and con-

fessed to him most of his private life. Since then they had met occasionally in other bars. Raveau, the honest "expert" in pictures, a man of evident wealth and refinement, was not the sort of good Parisian for Le Clerc to withhold anything from. This was proved during their fifth round of drinks, Le Clerc, continuing on dry Martinis, rare for a Frenchman, for he generally consumes one now and then from curiosity through a straw, while the "expert" on pictures changed to white wine, raspberry juice, and siphon.

It was at the end of the fifth round that Le Clerc, well heated by the American drink so amusing, gave Raveau his business card, upon which the latter read that Le Clerc was head "placer" of precious stones with the firm of Faulçon-Mallet fils, a most honourable and ancient house in the rue de Provence. Le Clerc did not also forget to mention that—she was pretty, the wife of a big merchant in Paris. He bent his grinning head close to Raveau's listening ear, and mentioned the successful merchant's name. "She had never cared for him anyway," he confided, in the sotto voce of a man of fifty who prides himself upon being still good-looking enough to be irresistible to women. "Besides, she was fond of jewels," and the price he had managed to continue to sell them to his infatuation was only slightly above cost. They had been intimate friends for over two years. "Do you understand?" he chuckled. Raveau coughed, regained his breath, and said: "Perfectly, lucky one.

What will you have? It is life that, eh? One is a fool not to make the best of one's opportunities. A man who is not able to control his wife's affairs of the heart deserves to be deceived. Pooh!"

"Naturally," agreed the chosen one. "I'll show him to you any day if you like. He plays piquet in a Grand Café from five to seven every day except Tuesdays and Sundays." And he continued to enthuse over her "chicness" and her beauty.

Incredible as it may seem, this indiscreet confession of Le Clerc's had occurred upon Raveau's third meeting with him in a bar. Men can meet in Parisian bars daily for years, and rarely come across each other elsewhere. Seldom do they bother their heads about the life, domicile, and occupation of the bar or café acquaintance in the meantime.

The day had arrived when Le Clerc's confession meant everything to Raveau. He regarded this playful blackmail he had decided upon as necessary. He had no doubt but that under his threat to enlighten the husband, Le Clerc would capitulate by giving him the necessary recommendation to Faulçon-Mallet fils—precisely the recommendation he intended to dictate to him.

They sat down to luncheon together the next day in a café opposite the Gare St. Lazare. It was already smoky and crowded when Raveau entered at noon to wait for his guest. He immediately chose a table in the rear, screened by a ground-glass partition, back of which stands the "plongeur" who

washes the glasses, next to the lady at the till, at the extreme end of this old and popular bar.

The place was in a hubbub, as it generally is at noon, and crowded with those who have come there for years: men and women of leisure, the monde and the demi-monde, American jockeys, English trainers, merchants, actors, aviators, and staid old gentlemen whose habits are as regular as their incomes; Pekinese fox-terriers, and fluffy, bright-eyed, spoiled miniature Pomeranians, who travel mostly *en luxe* in their mistresses muffs, and are content with nothing save their opinions of other dogs.

As Le Clerc entered, and passed along through the crowd at the bar, Raveau rose, beckoned to him, and stretched out his hand to his guest.

"How goes it, my old one?" cried Le Clerc, boisterous with his usual rough enthusiasm. "Imagine to yourself, my friend, that I worried fearing to be late. An excellent client detained me over a necklace, a lady of all beauty, and chic!" he went on as the waiter separated his fat arms and heavy shoulders from his fur coat, and took away with it his derby hat, which its owner had just lifted from his short, fat, florid face.

"Take my seat," insisted Raveau; "you will be out of the draught. There is a little draught here, you know, but I like this corner; one is at home here."

"Do not move, I pray you," protested Le Clerc.

"But I insist," exclaimed Raveau, and in insist-

ing, his reason was to put his own back to the light, the better to study the man before him.

It is an old trick of editors and business men, and Raveau meant business to-day. He met Le Clerc's small, jovial eyes set in his heavy, florid face, with another calm smile of polite insistence, and Le Clerc, opening wide his fat hands, shrugged his shoulders in obedience, declared that Raveau was altogether too amiable—a compliment typical with Parisians—and accepted the proffered seat, while the waiter hurried to their table to serve the "hors d'œuvres."

Now it happened that, the "hors d'œuvres" consumed, the luncheon continued with broiled smoked haddock, that excellent dish of the English, and proceeded with hot roast beef and those boiled potatoes of the English which have no taste whatsoever, but which the English eat from tradition. And, meantime, Le Clerc ate heartily, drank heavily of the stout of the English, retucked his voluminous napkin under his coarse red chin, and with a sigh of contentment leaned back and tranquilly combed his dyed moustache with a small comb, which he replaced in his vest pocket while waiting for the French salad and the English Chester cheese.

"As I tell you," continued Raveau, "art is practically dead with the rare sales that are made in Paris to-day, and experts like myself are seldom called upon."

"You're right," agreed Le Clerc, sleepily dropping a

toothpick, while Raveau refreshed his guest's glass from a pewter pint.

"And *your* business?" ventured his host.

"It goes well," declared Le Clerc, rousing himself. "As long as there are pretty women in the world, there will always be enough jewels for them."

"Naturally," returned Raveau.

Le Clerc now leaned heavily across the table and confided: "If you had seen her this morning, my friend, tall, blond, superb. I saw a little twinkle in her eye as she left."

"Lucky one!" laughed Raveau quietly. "Ah! what will you have? The women—the women! That is all Paris is, is it not? The women!"

"Parbleu!" agreed Le Clerc with the decision of a conqueror.

"If they only bought pictures as they do jewels," Raveau went on. "Alas! they do not. I was speaking of this only yesterday to the husband of your friend Madame——"

Before he could pronounce her name, Le Clerc darted forward, his mouth half open.

"You were—what?" he ventured, breathing heavily, and now fully awake.

"Speaking to him," repeated Raveau quietly.

"You know him?" inquired Le Clerc, in dull astonishment.

"Yes," said Raveau, leaning back; "I have known him for years, Madame also. She very often used to come to the rue Lafitte when we had our gallery there

to ask our advice, though it is quite possible she does not remember me. Twice, I remember distinctly, about an important affair, a Fragonard that a friend of hers wished to sell her friend, the Countess Venay, if I remember right. It is some years ago."

"Sacristi! it's funny what—what you tell me," stammered Le Clerc.

"It may be less humorous than it seems," returned Raveau coolly, "but it is, nevertheless, true. I envy your business—jewels have always attracted me. The profession, too, as I was telling the husband of your friend, Monsieur Delmar, yesterday, I have a friend whom I envy."

"You did not mention my name," breathed Le Clerc.

"Not yet," answered Raveau, beckoning to the waiter.

Le Clerc raised his eyes with a sort of puzzled sullenness.

"What do you mean by 'not yet?'" he asked.

"I said I have not mentioned your name *yet*," returned Raveau.

"Well?"

"Well, how do you suppose *I* would do in the jewellery business, Le Clerc?"

"You know nothing," replied Le Clerc, with a strange, suspicious look in his eyes.

"I shall know more when I get through," returned Raveau, offering him a cigarette; "enough at least to satisfy Faulçon-Mallet fils with my services as a

placer of their stones—honestly placed, Le Clerc. Do not forget that! You can determine the value of gold by sulphuric acid and a scale. You can measure the number of carats in a diamond! Pictures are always a risk. You see my point? More cheese?" ventured Raveau.

"Nothing," returned Le Clerc, shaking his head with a jerk of refusal. The fact was that his uneasiness was plainly written on his features. Men are as intuitive as women at times, especially when they scent distrust and danger. In fact, there crept to his cheeks a dull flush of anger. He moved uneasily in his seat, and, with a sudden impulse, rose up cold, sober, his two big fists on the table, leaned over toward his host and said, in a voice that was more savage than polite:

"Monsieur, I bid you good-day."

"You do not understand," returned Raveau evenly, raising his hand.

"I understand perfectly," replied Le Clerc. "Do you take me for a fool? You wish me, in exchange for my confidence—of—of—mon Dieu!—a little adventure, if you will, to guarantee you with my firm."

"It is surprising how you have guessed the truth, my friend," remarked Raveau, pushing the Chester from him. "Sit down, calm yourself, and tell me frankly if you do not think this favour which I ask of you is not worth arranging—er—under the circumstances, especially when you consider the lady's good

name and your own. We must further agree that her husband will not be altogether pleased——”


The muscles of Le Clerc's face twitched perceptibly, and Raveau saw the colour leave his heavy cheeks. For all of two minutes he sat silent, with his elbows on the table, his chin sunk in his hands, staring at the remnant of cheese on his plate. It was plain blackmail, and he knew it. He knew also that Raveau was a determined man. His whole personality, his quiet voice and his calm, left no doubt that he meant what he said.

Like most men of ungovernable temper, Le Clerc was a man of small courage. Slowly his anger returned, he shut his fists hard upon the table, and muttered something to himself which Raveau did not catch, but which brought the hot blood again to his cheeks.

His host broke the silence.

“Permit me to leave you for a moment so you may think it over,” said he. “There is a friend back of me whom I must speak to.” Le Clerc nodded a sullen permission, and Raveau rose and crossed to a table in an alcove at the extreme end of the café, occupied by a small man of some forty-odd years of age—a small, quiet man with blond hair and moustache and a short, pointed beard, who lifted his clear blue eyes inquiringly to Raveau's as he approached.

“You are, if I am not mistaken, Monsieur Laval, of the Sureté,” said Raveau.



"I am Monsieur Lavallo," returned the other.

"We are confrères," Raveau explained with lowered voice, and a slow smile, "since I am attached to our service at Lyon."

"Enchanted, Monsieur," said Inspector Lavallo, and the two shook hands.

From a red Russian leather portfolio Raveau extracted a card bearing his photograph, and beside which was printed the following identification:

"Emile Raveau, member of the Sureté of the Préfecture of Police of the city of Lyon."

It had always been a valuable card to Raveau in little affairs of the past.

"I must telephone about an important matter," he confided to Lavallo. "My man is lunching with me. If he attempts to leave during my absence, which I fear he will——"

"I shall detain him at the door," murmured Lavallo. "What is the case? What name? Your man, I mean?"

"Le Clerc, the affair of Lemaire, merchant in woollens, Paris—research for divorce."

"Good!" said Lavallo, as Raveau again grasped his hand and passed the swinging-door into the wash-room, where the telephone hung.

Le Clerc was alone. A sudden fury seized him.

"Let him do what he likes," he muttered to himself savagely. He snapped his fingers at the waiter. "My coat and hat!"

"Bien, Monsieur," replied that veteran garçon de café.

Le Clerc, having wrenched his arms into his overcoat, jammed his hat on his head, picked up his stick, and strode toward the door, red, furious, and still muttering to himself. As the chasseur opened the door for him, Inspector Lavalley touched him lightly on the shoulder. "One moment, Monsieur Le Clerc," said he. "I must ask you to return to the seat you have just left."

"Monsieur—Monsieur—I do not know you," stammered Le Clerc.

"Permit, Monsieur, to make my personality a little clearer," and he passed, under the now thoroughly frightened gaze of Le Clerc, his card of identification, bearing his photograph and the words:

"Member of the Sureté of Paris."
The Préfecture of Police."

"Our mutual friend, Monsieur Raveau, has something further to say to you in regard to the affair Lemaire. You will kindly follow me back to the seat you have just left," quietly insisted the detective.

"I? I?" blurted out Le Clerc, while his fat hands trembled in the pockets of his overcoat. "You are mistaken, Monsieur. I tell you, I have nothing to do with Monsieur Lemaire."

"You will kindly follow me, Monsieur," repeated Lavalley; "either to your seat, or to the commissaire of police. Take your choice, Monsieur."

Le Clerc no longer hesitated.

When an inspector of the Sureté of Paris touches you on the arm, you generally do what he wishes, and quietly. Their mission in life is a delicate one, and they are all-powerful, these quiet men. Paris swarms with them. They are everywhere and nowhere.

Le Clerc no longer hesitated. He reached his seat promptly, shaking in every nerve as his host rejoined him.

"Thank you, Lavalley," said Raveau, as the former paid his bill and took his leave with a nod to his "confrère," and Raveau seated himself and ordered the coffee and liqueurs.

"I tell you, I—I—agree," stammered Le Clerc; "anything you ask—*anything*, do you understand? If I am pursued in this affair I am ruined." He passed his fat palm wearily over his damp forehead. "I'm married—do you understand?"

"Do not alarm yourself," replied his host. "I have no intention of ruining you, now that you have agreed, and as far as any suspicion resting on you in this matter, I promise you I will keep you free from it. Evidently you are not the only person who has found favour in Madame's eyes."

At this Le Clerc brightened, shrugged his shoulders, and with a hand which still trembled, lighted a cigarette.

"You will take me to the firm now," said Raveau, when he had paid the bill.

"It is understood," agreed Le Clerc, rising with the relieved expression of a man who has narrowly escaped death.

For the first time since he gave five gold louis to the "Cat," Raveau had taken a step back into his old profession.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

YOU know that rubies are shown in the morning. They are much more splendid in the morning than in the afternoon. Their true colour of blood needs the morning light to be seen at their best. Unlike red wine and women, who are lead in the morning, silver at noon, and golden at night, rubies assert their best aspect before noon.

The lot enveloped in four white tissue-papers which Faulçon-Mallet fils had entrusted to Raveau were small stones averaging from four hundred and eighty francs apiece, and no more. There were twenty-five of them. The "no more" is typical of the jewel merchant.

Raveau was proud of his rubies. When he first showed them to Babette, she clapped her hands.

"Ah! Dieu! are they not pretty?" she exclaimed.

"They are genuine," returned her husband.

"You know, my dearest, there is something uplifting in things which are genuine, which are true."

"And you—you are true like these pretty stones. Tell me again what they are worth," she whispered.

"In actual value?"

"Yes, my dearest."

"Ten thousand four hundred francs."

She drew a quick breath.

"Ten thousand four hundred francs!—— They are not given away," and they both laughed, for they were happier these two, now that Raveau was the trusted employee of Faulçon-Mallet fils.

The trusted employee! It meant much to Raveau to be that. He was tasting that sweet contentment which comes from reform. He was proud of the absolute confidence they had given him, proud of his jewels, proud of his wife, proud of himself. Despite his criminal means to an end, he had accomplished what he had decided upon.

In three days they said of Raveau in the café of the jewel men on the rue Lafayette:

"He has them." For they were known, these rubies.

On the sixth day after he had been intrusted with them, the Serbians and Poles, the old woman always veiled, and the Russian who shot himself a week later, agreed that Raveau had "missed" his purchaser, an American who, although then heavily in debt, was an excellent client during those afternoons when he felt inclined to add to the jewels of a small English girl with brown eyes, a dancer—imagine it!—and who had the bad habit of selling her gifts at a huge sacrifice as soon as discretion would permit after her effusion over the donor. Raveau's rubies were too dear for this gentleman, whose thirst was continuous, but who could speak fairly comprehensively before noon.

During these days two policemen paced before this popular café; their services were rarely required, since

a brotherhood existed among the hundred or so placers of stones who frequented it daily, and a row or a theft was almost unheard of. The smoke was generally thick inside. The place was crowded and fully alive by five o'clock, a murmur of voices in many languages: Greek, Armenian, Polish, Russian, Tchec, Portuguese, and Spanish rose in the café, French being fairly rare and generally badly spoken. Thousands upon thousands of francs in stones often lay open in their white tissue-papers on the tables while their drummers played dominoes or piquet for mild drinks, and the proprietor shook most of his clients by the hand when they parted at seven in the evening to carry their unsold wares back to their respective firms.

A stranger entering, a man unknown, was generally conducted to a remote table in the corner by the proprietor and served politely by one of the three veteran waiters—and watched, to see, as the French say, “that his fingers were not too long.” It was a place of many languages, of varied tobaccos—a café of confidence, of perfect understanding, and it prided itself upon its exclusive clientèle as much as a club. In this exchange of precious stones were grandfathers with turquoises, sons with pearls, fathers with emeralds, widows—always old and ugly—with the job-lots of their dead husbands, bartering, selling, considering, trading, always talking, and generally drinking coffee, which was usually served in a glass and cost six sous.

"They are too dear for me," said the American, as he loitered over Raveau's rubies for the third time in the café before noon. "I'll give you two thousand five hundred francs for six of the lot. Is it a go? I'll make 'em into a bracelet for Flo. She's crazy about bracelets. How do I look?"

"Sit down," said Raveau; "you look all right. Had a heavy night, eh?"

"Haven't been to bed."

"Where?"

"At the Royal—Montmartre all night. It's a cinch if you can eat, but if you can't eat, you're one nit by morning. I can't eat—understand?—got dyspepsia. It's hell."

"Have a coffee?" ventured Raveau.

"Not for me."

"A little soup, then? It'll set you up. Get a good sleep, a little more soup, and a walk, and you'll be all right by five o'clock."

"That's what Flo told me. Say, excuse me, but you're a wonder as a mind reader. How about the twenty-five hundred?"

"I can't," said Raveau. "My orders are to sell the lot intact."

"Well, so long!" said the American; "and I wish you good luck." And the American wandered over to a group of Armenians as a thin, dark-skinned man in a voluminous gray woollen overcoat, his wiry hands in his pockets, sauntered up to the table where Raveau was sitting, tossed him a package of cigarettes,

and sat down in the chair the American had just vacated.

"Let me see the lot," he said confidentially, leaning forward. "The American doesn't want them, eh?"

"Too dear," said Raveau, again spreading open the paper.

"I know a man who I'm pretty sure will," declared the newcomer, Vinet, ex-expert at the Mont-de-Piété, and now a diamond drummer.

Raveau snapped out his watch.

"It's nearly noon," said he. "Where's your man? Here, take them, Vinet, if you want them, but let me have them back before two o'clock. I'm lunching here and I'll wait," and, with that freemasonry and confidence which exists among these sellers of precious stones, Raveau confided his lot to Vinet. At a quarter-past twelve Babette entered the café to lunch with Raveau. She left him at a little before two. It was long after three when Vinet returned with the rubies.

"I'm sorry, old one," said he, "but they are too dear for my client. Here, look at these two," he said, throwing aside with his nail a pair out of the group nestled in the tissue-paper, "they're from Siam—I'll bet you a thousand francs. Here, take my glass."

"Garnets?" ventured Raveau.

Vinet shrugged his shoulders with a smile. "Not exactly—rubies, if you will, but you know the value

of Siamese rubies compared with the real merchandise."

"They were confided to me as first quality," declared Raveau, examining the stones through the glass.

"I may be wrong," returned Vinet; "the light is getting bad."

Raveau raised his hands politely without replying, refolded his treasure in its tissue-papers, shook his confrère by the hand, and left the café to return the lot to his firm.

When he reëntered Faulçon-Mallet fils, he weighed them, saw nothing abnormal in them, handed the lot to the clerk to put in the safe, and left with two solitaire diamonds and a paper of turquoises.

That evening he took Babette to the big cinéma on the Place Clichy. They had a modest little supper together at Graf's, and returned to their hotel shortly before one in the morning, where the sleepy porter handed him a telegram from Faulçon-Mallet fils summoning him to present himself to the firm at nine in the morning without fail.

Mr. Isidore Mallet was the first to confront him.

"Monsieur," he began, twirling his eyeglasses, "the lot of rubies we intrusted to you, and which you returned to us yesterday afternoon, are, I may tell you plainly, Monsieur, not wholly intact. Here, examine them yourself."

Raveau, silent, his glass over the stones, examined them without a visible sign of alarm save a short,

quick breath, as he rapidly discovered in the sharp morning light five of the stones as strangers in the package.

"Well," said Mallet fils, rubbing his thin, pale hands with a sort of devilish satisfaction, "what do *you* think?"

"There are five stones among the lot, Monsieur Mallet," returned Raveau, "which I am certain you are right were not in the original paper."

"And that is all you have to say to us!" snapped back Isidore Mallet. "We intrust you with twenty-five rubies worth ten thousand four hundred francs, and you——"

"One moment, Monsieur," said Raveau, eying the excited man before him. Briefly he recited his intrusting the lot to Vinet.

It was plain Vinet had changed the stones and returned them shrewdly in the afternoon light, when they were at a glance under the glass more difficult to recognize.

"We shall want no more of your services, Monsieur," declared Mallet hotly. "It is not the first time one of our employees has been fool enough to intrust his lot to another."

"It is done daily among our men," said Raveau, looking straight into the watery blue eyes of Isidore Mallet. "Daily, Monsieur. How much do I owe you?"

The lids of the watery blue eyes of Isidore Mallet lowered, and while he gazed at Raveau beneath

them it was a sudden peaceful gaze that Isidore Mallet was wont to assume when it was a question of money.

"We—we do not want to be hard on you," said he, rubbing his hands.

"I shall claim a slight discount," continued Raveau, "for the two Siamese rubies you managed to send me out with. You will oblige me by accepting this sum of a thousand francs on account, to show my good faith," and drawing out his portfolio, he handed the astonished Isidore two five-hundred-franc bank-notes. "I shall send you the remainder to-morrow. Monsieur, I bid you good-day."

Isidore Mallet's eyes opened like two bad oysters.

"Mein Gott!" he exclaimed in broken English, gazing after the vanishing figure as it closed the door. "Vere efer dit he got—ut?"

Raveau slipped rapidly along the narrow rue de Provence and gained the busy Chaussée d'Antin.

"Vinet changed the stones," he muttered to himself. He was a thief, like he himself had been, and thieves do not attack each other. He regarded him in the light of a "slick guy" who had played him, not knowing his own career, and had landed him.

All this, however, was only incidental in the mind of the man who had tried hard to become honest and failed to reap its benefit. He was disappointed, discouraged, disgusted. "I might have known," he said to himself. And the old desire suddenly

surged within him as he slipped on through the crowded thoroughfare, and turned into the Boulevard Haussmann.

He had taken a definite resolute step back into his old career. He had one goal in life—to provide, to love, to care for Babette, and he no longer hesitated to return to the only means available to an end. And yet, not a word did Babette know of this, and she slept soundly that night, her fair head pillowed in the hollow of his arm, dreaming of her father, of the Mère Truchard, of their wedding breakfast. Twice she awakened in the night and fell asleep again, feeling his hand soothing her cheek, for they were happy, these two.

In the morning she awoke laughing over an incident of no importance.

It is said that those who really laugh are happy, and the woman who sings is sad.

Soberly thinking it over after the unfortunate turn of affairs with his jewel firm and the traitor Vinet, Raveau still hesitated. Only when two weeks later Babette fell ill with an acute attack of bronchitis and the doctor ordered her immediately south, away from the raw winter air of Paris, did Raveau hesitate no longer.

He was sitting in the overheated, stuffy post-office under the Gare St. Lazare. A trusted man of fifty, in a blue uniform, a cocked hat bordered with gilt braid, and a big portfolio secured to him by a brass

chain, was standing near. It was the duty of this collector to register letters containing money and negotiable coupons gathered from different business houses.

Raveau this morning was immaculately dressed. You would have marked him as some distinguished gentleman among the nervous crowd waiting patiently at the six busy windows, each in charge of a postal clerk according to his special department.

The man in the blue uniform abandoned his chance at the registered-letter window and sat down on the bench provided for the weary waiting for their telephone communication—waiting as they all do in French post-offices.

Raveau wore gray kid gloves, a gray overcoat, and a silk hat, whose sheen and reflections were faultless. Why was he there, loitering in that ill-smelling atmosphere? To telephone, to buy stamps, to purchase a money order, to inquire at the “poste-restante” if there were any letters for him?

It is quite possible, perhaps, at this busy hour—five minutes past noon—when the shopgirl and the young employee stroll arm in arm out for lunch; when the girl from Montmartre, the grande dame with a new love affair, the modiste, the mannequin, the young clerk, the painter who has fallen in love (definitely this time) with Mlle X., who lives during the night with her parents at Asnières; the high functionary of state, also in love; the woman seeking a divorce, the man whose business it is to have no definite

address save the "poste-restante," the grisette—if there are any left; the respectable bourgeois, amusing himself with intrigue; honest people *en voyage*, with no other address possible at the moment; the crook, who receives his mail sometimes at the "poste-restante," sometimes from the grimy hand of a gamin on the street; noble gentlemen dallying with discretion and the reverse; the soldier on leave for twenty-four hours from his caserne waiting for a word of rendezvous from his girl, all come to the small window of the "poste-restante" with mingled hope and fear in their hearts—in their eyes.

It is astonishing how short the replies are in the longed-for letters they receive. The phrases: "Impossible," "I adore you," "Until Thursday then," "I am desolate," "I implore you not to write again," "It is understood," "A thousand kisses," "He knows all," "If you do not reply to this I would rather die," "At the Quai d'Orsay then at four-ten—oh, my beloved."

Ah, yes, it is the most important little window of all the "poste-restante."

And the young man in charge of this comedy and tragedy of human life is so quick, so discreet, so patient.

Mlle. X. presents an addressed and cancelled envelope to him without a word, though her heart beats. He receives it face down, half turns, glances at it face up, and reads: "Mademoiselle A. T. 201. B. bureau 46"; glances over the package of letters in

his hand, one by one, like a faro dealer counting a full pack of cards.

"There is nothing," he says.

She turns away, a slight pallor in her cheeks, her eyes struggling to keep back the tears.

Another envelope is pushed to him. He hands two letters to a lady in deep mourning.

She goes away radiant to her waiting automobile.

Raveau was, however, not watching the window of the "poste-restante." His eyes were carefully studying the one in the blue uniform with the chained portfolio. He drew close to him. A moment later evidently an old friend, another collector in uniform, approached his friend sitting on the bench.

"Good-morning, my old one!" said he hurriedly.

"Good-morning," said the other. "I say, my old one, I have a pressing affair across the street—a fellow I shall surely miss if I wait for all this mob to get through. Register this, will you, for me? I'll be back in five minutes and you can give me the receipt."

"Certainly, my old one," returned his friend in the cocked hat, and shoved the heavily sealed letter in his overcoat pocket.

"Pardon, Monsieur," said Raveau a moment later; "would you mind moving up a little?"

"Sit down, I pray you, Monsieur," said the other, as both touched the brims of their hats.

"The heat in here is fearful," remarked Raveau.

"It is always like this," returned the other. "One is lucky not to have to work here."

"It is unbearable," replied Raveau, lifting his silk hat and passing the palm of his gloved hand over his brow.

Suddenly he rose.

"I've got enough," said he. "I'll come later," and as he rose the sealed letter crinkled under his hand in the left-hand pocket of his gray overcoat.

Touching a lady standing next him on the arm, he said, again raising his hat: "Madame, I pray you accept my seat," and walked leisurely out of the bureau de poste.

The letter contained three thousand roubles in bank-notes, and some small and big coupons of Russian railroad stock.

He was very much bothered with the coupons. He knew the theft would be immediately reported to the police and be in the next day's papers, but he needed the money—*absolutely*.

Babette must be taken south.

Going to a money changer he knew of, he asked him to change the roubles. He dared not ask him to change the big coupons, but made a separate package of the smaller ones (two thousand francs in all) and presented these.

The money changer examined them.

"But your coupons have already been at the bank—last week, in fact—um! without doubt. I see that by the numbers on the back."

"It is quite possible," said Raveau.

"Never mind," returned the money changer. "Let me have your papers of identity."

Raveau had nothing on him save his military service book, and his receipt for the hotel bill in the rue de Moscou, neither of which he wished to present. He was forced to give these. It was then half-past seven in the evening, and the door of the money changer was already locked to the public, his employee grinding down the iron shutters of the office. It was impossible to escape; fatal to hesitate. In all probability the money changer would have had him arrested. He gave him his papers of identity and got his money.

That night the express carried Babette and himself to the Riviera, to a cozy, forgotten little village on a restful, balmy little bay called Le Lavandou. Nice at present was too dangerous.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

IT IS a cove full of perfume and gentle sounds. The turquoise water sweeps along the little beach, stirring the millions of tiny shells along its edge. Water as clear as emerald, that breaks softly in miniature waves, sweeps on over the fine hard sand, and recedes noiselessly as if fearful of disturbing the slumberer on the beach.

The night breeze whispers through the pines. The cool clear note of a bird from somewhere in the forest—a fairy forest in the moonlight, full of the scent of lavender and violets and genesta.

“*Le Lavandou*”—“Sweet Lavender.”

What a pretty name for this hidden spot along the Riviera which seems to have been especially tucked away for the weary and for lovers.

During the day, in the balmy sunshine, gay-coloured fishing-boats lie down on the beach; they, too, seem asleep, and near them, upon a modest corner of this paradise, stands an unostentatious little inn with a rambling roof and whose duty in life seems to be to please the weary and the lovers. Its cuisine is oily. They fry and fricassé and stew and sleep in *Le Lavandou*, and only the station master has the right time.

In certain spots in the world the sun strikes cruel hard. In Le Lavandou it tans with a caress. It is so silent, this little cove, that a fish no bigger than a watch-charm, dimpling the surface of the water, attracts your attention, for you half open your eyes. It is sweet, this little spot, and there are orange peels drying on the clean white pebbles. A fishing-boat, loaded with her brown nets, skims to shore, a squirrel in a tree drops an acorn, a shoal of fish greedily stir the surface of emerald and disappear.

Le Lavandou was never made for bad weather. Neither its houses nor its people. It depends upon the favours of the sun. When it rains, Le Lavandou becomes ill. When the mistral blows, when the pine trees rock and groan under the wind, and the bay goes mad in frantic waves under raw gusts of wind, this restful Paradise becomes sad and unbearable. But for all of ten fine days after Babette and Raveau arrived, the warm sun shone, and their days together were lazy ones—half asleep on the slippery carpet of fragrant pine needles, until the arrival of the fishermen sent them down to the beach to overlook the catch. The fishermen liked them, and when the fisherfolk like you the whole village is yours. They are a fine race—the fishermen. They are sincere. They have little imagination, which is the basis of most lying. They speak facts and speak them modestly, about the sea, about the weather, about the wind.

Thus their days at Le Lavandou passed full of love

and contentment. Babette had never seen the sea. It fascinated her. She would prowls for hours along the beach which winds in and out in a series of small coves bordered by the pines. The green water swirling about the black rocks enchanted her, so did also the tiny shells crushing under her small bare feet as she walked. There were millions of these shells—rose and dove gray and ivory white—which kept her eyes continuously searching for the prettiest. These prettiest she collected in her handkerchief and carefully preserved in the top bureau drawer of their bedroom—their low-ceiled square bedroom fronting the water. So that in the morning, as she lay half awake, she could see just over the window-sill the blue vista of the bay.

She was conscious that she was happy; that she had grown stronger. Their stay in Le Lavandou was, after all, only a continued honeymoon. The days slipped by with no thought whatever for the future. With this lazy life it became an effort even to write to her father.

"You must write surely this morning, my little one," said her husband.

"I will," she promised him, and wrote a postcard to Monsieur Pivot only on the following afternoon. She was young, and so full now of idleness and happiness and contentment daily. She was thoroughly happy.

"It is Thursday," she declared to him, early one morning.

"It is Friday," he affirmed.

"Ah!" she would reply, having lost all track of the days.

Love intoxicates at times, and she loved him, you may well believe, as only a French girl can love—unselfishly, with her whole heart, with all her honesty, for she came from a race who place love close to religion.

There was in her whole being at this moment neither doubt nor jealousy. Jealous of Raveau? Was he not her own? Doubt him? Suspect?—him of much that he had a right to be suspected for? He whom she adored and was proud to adore. These things never entered her mind. This man with his child-wife nevertheless worried. The difficulty of getting money hung over him like a debt. Something must be done occasionally, and he knew it. The chance of being stranded at times terrified him. When one has a profession and is skilled at it, one generally goes back to it in time of need.

Often, early in the morning, Babette stood by the open window of their bedroom, waiting for the flash of the two French dreadnoughts off in the vicinity of the Salines d'Hyères at long-distance target-practice. Even at this distance the heavy guns, as she stood at the window, sent a puff of air against her face, stirring her hair. She could wait and see the flash afar off like a blinding electric spark, though the vessel itself was invisible.

"You will catch cold in your bare feet," remarked

Raveau drowsily. "Babette, put on your slippers. Babette, do you hear me? You must put on your slippers, my child."

She pouted a little, went back to their bed, searched for them under it, recovered them, and put them on. Again she was at the window waiting for the flash. "My dearest," she exclaimed, turning to her husband, "is it not fascinating? If it goes as easily as this, some day we shall beat the Germans."

"I hope so sincerely," said Raveau, presumably half asleep.

"Is it not funny to have summer in winter?" she laughed. "Listen! my beloved! There goes another!"

A flash, a pause, and a boom, and again the puff of air throwing wide open the window, ajar this time, and stirring her hair and the soft lace at her open throat. She clapped her hands like a child at a fête.

"Is it not wonderful?" she cried. "They are strong, those guns."

"Come, my dearest, you must not stand there!" he said, this time sternly. "You will catch cold."

And she obeyed him, as she always obeyed him, although the heavy guns of the two dreadnoughts continued to flash and boom at regular intervals afar off on the azure mirror of water, veiled in a light mist.

At this moment, the valet de chambre knocked at their door.

"Letters for Monsieur," said he.

"Come in," said Raveau.

There were three, in fact. One from Monsieur Pivot, one from Pantin, and a third postmarked "Nice"—a letter which Raveau eagerly read in bed, and which Babette perused over his shoulder, totally unconscious of the fact that Raveau had written it.

"Listen, my dearest!" said Raveau. "It is from my old friend, Jean Vautrin, the one I told you about, who was associated with Paul and myself in our wine business. He has just completed an important order for a light Bordeaux with a big hotel company in Nice, and wishes me to be present when we sign the contract."

She slipped her hand under his neck and, gazing into his fine gray eyes for a moment, smiled.

"You must go," said she. "I shall not be lonely."

"It will only be for a few days, and it is better that you stay here," said he.

"As you wish," said she quietly, and kissed him. "It is for a great affair, is it not, my beloved?" she asked.

"It means, Babette—it means that we shall have very little to worry over after the deal is completed. Can you understand, my child?"

"You must go at once!" she declared. "One never knows. It is better to go immediately to sell your wine. They may change their minds."

Raveau turned upon his elbow and regarded her with a curious smile in which lurked a certain pride.

"I am proud of you," he said at length.

"I am not much in life," she answered him simply,

"but I love you. Do you know really how much I love you?"

He was still smiling at her.

"I think I do," he answered, brushing her cheek with his lips.

"My dearest."

"What, my dearest?"

"Is it not wonderful the marriage? I love you so—I am so happy—so proud of you. I had a thought yesterday as we lay in the woods. Listen, my dearest! You are so wise. You will not be angry if I tell you. If I tell you truly?"

"My little Babette," he returned, and seeing her lower her eyes, asked:

"What do you wish to tell me?"

"First, that I love you——" she began, and hesitated. "Pierre!"

"What, my dearest?"

"You will never leave me?" she whispered, her lips close to his ear.

"Leave you! my poor Babette! *Leave* you?" he exclaimed. "My poor baby, what has gotten into your head? *Leave* you? Are you crazy? Tell me—no, frankly, tell me."

"Listen, my beloved! I have read in books about those who have loved leaving each other. I should die, Pierre—if—if you were to leave me."

"*Leave* you," he repeated. "Truly, are you ill, my little one? What nonsense you talk."

"I have read in the books," she replied sadly,

recalling two of the romances from the cupboard in the antechamber of the prison.

"Books are mostly lies," he said to her so earnestly that she replied:

"It is true—what you tell me?"

"Books, romances—of course," he laughed. "They are manufactured. Romance is not true love," he went on to say. "One never truly loves in books."

And thus they talked on.

"To Nice," said he when she further questioned him.

"Where is that?" she asked.

"Below here," he told her. "We shall go there some day," he promised.

Presently she sat up in bed and drew a long breath from the sea, half closing her eyes, her small, plump hands brushing back her wreath of blond hair in a shower of light gold rippling over the lace screening her firm shoulders.

Raveau watched her, leaning on his elbow.

The dialogue between them was of the simplest.

"Where did you get that?" he questioned, noticing a tiny scratch close to the blue vein in the curve of her elbow.

"In the pines—when I fell yesterday perhaps. It is nothing, my dearest. It is already healed."

He pressed his lips to her soft young throat.

"You must be careful," said he. "The pine needles are like glass."

"What time is it?" she asked.

He drew his watch from beneath his pillow.

"Twenty minutes past eight."

"We must ring for our coffee," she decided. "Mon Dieu! but I am hungry!"

"It is the sea air," he answered her; "besides, you are no longer ill. Had you stayed in Paris, you would have been really ill. See, my dearest, you have not coughed for days."

"It is the air here," she returned, starting quickly to braid her hair. "One could never be ill in this air. Is it not delicious?" And she drew another deep breath. "One is well here," she affirmed; "the air of Paris is abominable. Ring, my beloved."

And when he had rung and the valet de chambre appeared with their two white bowls of coffee, the pitcher of milk, and their portions of bread and butter, it was she who buttered his bread for him, slicing it lengthwise in what the French call a "tartine," and arranged everything upon his lap for his comfort first, giving him most of the coffee and the best bowl of the two, that was not nicked, and got up to wipe for him the big pewter spoon, that it might be spotlessly clean for her lord and master.

The heavy guns far off in the blue and mist had ceased firing.

Some fishermen were talking under their window. The proprietress rapped at their door with their wash, inquired if they had slept well, and carefully deposited some fine lace and linen, blue ribboned, upon a vacant

chair, went back and returned with the shirts of Monsieur, and announced cheerfully that there would be a *bouilliabaise* for luncheon.

"Do you like gelinottes, Madame?" she asked, turning genially toward them both. "They are as good as partridges. My husband is a great hunter. He adores to shoot. He kills them on the mountain—not every day, for he has not the time to spare, and it is far to go."

The proprietress, Madame Théron, possessed an excellent appetite. There had been nothing she could do to please these two guests of hers that she had not done. As for Babette, she took especial care of her daily, and as for Monsieur, Babette's husband, it was easily seen that she was thoroughly convinced that he was handsome and that his manners and good-breeding were beyond reproach. There still lurked in her heart a touch of coquetry. She had been an unusually handsome girl. She was still a handsome woman, despite her forty-eight years: tall, robust, with her jet-black hair neatly arranged in old-fashioned waves over her temples, and an ardent light in her black eyes.

"Gelinottes?" questioned Babette.

"Gelinottes," explained Raveau, "are about the size of small partridges. They are, as you say, Madame Théron, delicious. You shall see, my dearest. You spoil us, my good Madame."

"Then it is decided—for dinner, eh? I shall cook them for you," declared Madame, "en cocotte, with a

little slice of lard." She kissed her thumb and forefinger with a quick gesture, as if there were nothing more to be said as to the excellence of a gelinotte once in her willing hands, and with a nod and a smile left the room.

The day following found Raveau in Nice, and Babette alone at Le Lavandou.

He had decided upon one thing: to cash at all hazards the big coupons he had stolen from the collector in the post-office.

In the train, en route for Nice, he abandoned it for Cannes, where he knew of a local banker whom he felt it wiser to try before risking more dangerous Nice.

"One of my friends in Paris has been robbed," he said to the banker in Cannes. "They took away from him a certain number of Russian values. This passed ten days ago. My friend put the matter into the hands of the Mediterranean Secret Agency. Have you received the list warning you?" Raveau questioned him eagerly.

"So far, Monsieur, we have received nothing," declared the banker. "The Service is so badly done—You are speaking of the Valmont Agency?"

"Naturally," replied Raveau, "an affair of its importance is not generally handled by the smaller private detective bureaus."

The banker shrugged his shoulders.

"We have received nothing," he repeated guard-

edly. "If you will address yourself to a friend of mine across the street he may give you some information. He deals more in Russian securities than we do."

"You are a thousand times amiable," returned Raveau. "I shall go at once."

The banker bowed him ceremoniously to the door.

Raveau, being convinced that he was glad to get rid of him, followed his advice, and called on the friend. Here he managed to change a part of the coupons, and bought, as a guarantee of his good faith, other Russian coupons and roubles.

That night he returned to Babette with the good news that the affair in light Bordeaux had passed even more satisfactorily than he had expected, much to her pride and delight.

"I shall not go to Nice again for a month, my dearest," he told her. "There are other orders in wine pending for us."

Yet a week later he risked another trip. This time to Nice.

Now it happened that on this trip—two days after his arrival—he met the stationer of the Princess Tasino.

An idea occurred to him as he was passing the stationer's window with its display of crested notepaper. One sheet in particular attracted his attention: a gold-crested notepaper, bearing the Princess's address. With the address it was easy enough to discover in the directory at the nearest café the name

of this aged noblewoman, who lived in her villa close to the Place Messina.

Having got it, he returned to the stationer, ordered some notepaper for himself, and during the momentary absence of that worthy printer, stole a sample of the Princess's, put a reasonable deposit on his own order, and left the shop in a hurry, with the excuse that he had just time to catch the one o'clock express for Monte Carlo.

He immediately wrote a letter to a banker in Nice, named Varillo, upon the crest-paper of the Princess, representing himself as her secretary.

"The Princess Tasino wishes," the note ran, "that you change some roubles for her, but she adds that she is not satisfied with your rates." He stamped the letter, left it unsealed, and put it into his pocket. Then he went to another banker, and commenced to speak to him in French with a strong Russian accent.

"I am a Russian, Monsieur," he explained to this gentleman; "forgive me my faults in French. The Princess Tasino is not satisfied with her banker. She has asked me to change these roubles for her. I am the Princess's secretary. What is your rate?"

"Three francs, Monsieur."

"It is just," said Raveau. "To be frank, Monsieur, she is not at all satisfied with her banker, Monsieur Varavillo."

"His rates are high, as you say, Monsieur," returned the banker, evidently eager for the Princess's business.

"We might possibly arrange it," returned Raveau, "that the Princess deals wholly with you. That, I cannot, of course, promise you until I have talked with her."

"Naturally," returned the banker. "It is as you wish, Monsieur."

During the entire conversation the note of the Princess lay open before the banker on his desk. Both the address and the gold crest won the banker's confidence.

"One moment!" exclaimed Raveau. "How much would you ask to cash these Russian coupons?" They were the big coupons, and after the banker had carefully examined them, he told Raveau his rate.

"Ah!" exclaimed Raveau. "You give two sous more than Monsieur Varavillo. On a heavy sum this is worth considering. Very well worth considering, Monsieur. I shall see the Princess. She is getting old as you know, and, if I may confide in you, somewhat childish about her rate of exchange."

The banker smiled.

"She is a most estimable lady," he ventured. "We seldom see her driving out now."

"She is very feeble," said Raveau.

"Naturally, at her age," replied the banker as Raveau rose to take his leave with the promise that he would immediately see the Princess and return in an hour.

During this hour he took a brisk walk along the quay, entered the Casino, lost a few francs on the

"petits-cheveaux," drank a glass of porto, and returned to the banker.

"Yes," declared Raveau, "it is quite understood, Monsieur. The Princess decides to deal with you."

Half an hour later Raveau left the banker with his big coupons and his roubles cashed for over twenty thousand francs in clean French bank-notes. He did not reach Le Lavandou that night until late.

Babette was waiting for him in the dark at the small station.

When they were past the barrier of the station and on the small path that led to the inn, she withdrew her arm, snug under his own, and placed it about his neck.

"You are happy," she whispered against his cheek. "I see it in you eyes. Your affair went well. Tell me, my beloved."

"How did you guess?" he answered in the dark. "Yes, it went well, my little one; a thousand litres more of our best Bordeaux."

"I am so glad," she sighed against his lips.

As they entered the hotel Raveau saw three men seated at a marble-topped table in the dingy little café next to the dining-room.

"Ah! the good luck!" cried Madame Théron, coming forth to greet them. "What did I say, Madame? Did I not tell you Monsieur would be here for dinner?"

Babette took the flight of clean wooden stairs ahead of him.

"I shall not be a moment," Raveau called to her, stopped, and again glanced into the dining-room at the three seated at table. Entering, he called to Madame Théron for a vermouth, at a table removed from the group, who, he quietly observed, were dividing an omelette. One, a tall man with haggard eyes, gazed at his plate but did not eat, although the two men with him urged him to do so. Both these men had their broad backs to Raveau. Raveau studied the pale man with them, who still sat gazing doggedly at his untouched portion of omelette. Suddenly he recognized him, and as the two men rose with their man in charge, paid Madame Théron, and walked with their now discreetly re-handcuffed prisoner to the door, Raveau recognized an old acquaintance of his, twice convicted of forgery. Not once had Vibert raised his eyes to him, however. There is a certain honour among thieves.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE effect of this sudden apparition of two men of the Sureté of Nice in charge of his old friend Vibert in a lost hole of a village like Le Lavandou, seated in the café of the inn, a table removed from him, a floor removed from his wife, shook even the iron nerve of an old hand like Raveau.

When he had entered, both the inspectors said, "Bon jour Monsieur," to him, as is the custom in France when a stranger enters a public café occupied only by a single party.

Vibert, it seems, had been taken into custody in a small villa, a good three kilometres down the beach, which he had rented for the season. This domicile of the forger, and which bore the name of "Mon Abri" (My Shelter), might more consistently have been called a "villiette," since it was little more than a portable box of four rooms, demountable at will, its compartments bolted together; and more than once it had been moved intact by the widow who owned and rented it. It had been seen, in fact, at various points along the coast, according to the outlook in real estate, almost as far down as St. Raphael, and as far up as Hyères. Its rent was modest: four hundred francs the season.

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As there was no warrant of arrest for the young woman with Vibert, she was left to close the place. There was, in fact, nothing against her. Vibert had discovered her by chance at Avignon—not “on the bridge,” as the old French rondelay goes, but in the “Café des Trois Mousquetaires,” below that grim, half caserne, half palace, known as the “Palais du Pape,” as stern as religion, and as empty as a dry well, and which overlooks a vast, grim plain, which thousands of years of mistrals seem to have laid low, sad, and barren. There are even some great plains in the world, fertile, if you will, in spots, but as sad as the pavement of a prison, and which the wind has long ago conquered. The plain becomes the slave of the wind. The Palais du Pape dominates this plain. High up on the rock, its thick walls have taken the brunt of the ceaseless wind for centuries. Not content with ordinary rooms in those days, their walls, ceilings, and floor-space became colossal. They were, however, cleverly entered by small doors—doors that let in a single man at a time to receive an outstretched hand or a swordthrust. In this manner the visitor was at the mercy of his host.

It was a city in itself, little save war happened outside of its walls; within lurked religion, politics, and intrigue; love was counted on as a pastime, like falconry. A small man in the art of evil-doing, like Raveau, would have been regarded in the light of an amateur, a dilettante.

Intrigue, crime, and war, and the holy sanction of the church went hand-in-hand in those days: benedictions, a strong wrist, a quick eye, and a good blade. The ardent light in the eyes of a woman sought for by many, confessions, torture, poison, were daily incidents. They built the stronghold in accordance with the necessity of the age, and garnished it within with pomp and ceremony. The tramping feet and the voices of armed men echoed and reverberated through the vast corridors—men who were silenced by a word and led to battle by another; men whose business it was to kill, to make love, to eat, to ride, and to drink. All of which did not keep them from confessing to the priest, from trembling before the cardinal, from grovelling before the Pope, or from rotting in dungeons, hideous enough even when empty.

Had Monsieur Pivot been transferred from La Fourche to become guide and guardian of the Palais du Pape, I am quite sure he would have died under his sense of importance and responsibility.

Empty rooms smell of the past, and Monsieur Pivot always had an imagination, more or less historical—mostly less.

At Avignon, at the Café des Trois Mosquetaires, you might have seen this girl Marie seated daily at five in the afternoon at the same table. She was a pretty little brunette, honest and quiet. You could have left your portfolio with a thousand francs on the table and she would not have touched a sou of

it. She originally came from Arles; but she was better known in Avignon by a few well-to-do merchants of Provence whose morals forced them to secrete now and then a ten-franc piece in the inner pocket of their waistcoats.

Naturally, Marie was glad of the change of scene, and she followed Vibert with a heart full of gratitude, knowing naught where he got his money.

She proved to be an excellent housekeeper—economical—and a good comrade.

Poor Marie! She closed the “Abri” and went back to the café at Avignon, back to the whirling dust and the interminable mistral; back to her old life—to her old hat and her gray lisle thread gloves, which she had the habit of buttoning gracefully when she had paid for her glass of port or warm milk.

Raveau had now but one idea—to get out of Le Lavandou.

It is surprising how few secrets newspapers keep to themselves; they are the most indiscreet and the greatest gossipers in the world. In informing the public of a theft, they inform the thief of his dangers daily. The first thing a crook does after a “job,” which in French is called a “coup,” is to buy the newspapers. He buys them all, in fact, with the eagerness an actor does the morning after a new play, and reads them at his leisure, the only difference being that the consensus of critical opinion is never flattering to the thief, whereas the actor now and then is warmly praised or damned. Newspapers spend

thousands in innocently keeping the thief in touch by special dispatches, by exclusive cable service, and by the last sensational editions.

The case of the theft in the post-office was again revived in the newspapers, but the collector's description of Raveau was vague and misleading. He was, after all, a man of small observation, and the mental picture he gave to the commissaire of police, and the juge d'instruction in charge of the affair, was so misleading that he was quite certain that a gentleman—a monsieur—immaculately dressed—sat next to him, and that he was quite certain, by the head of his mother, that he could not have been the thief. He noticed a shabby young fellow going out ahead of him down the four steps that lead to the street and who jostled him in passing. It might have been he—alas! he was certain of nothing, save that when he rose from the bench to go down to the door and look for his comrade, who had intrusted the letter to him, the letter was gone.

"I rushed back, Monsieur," said the honest man to the juge d'instruction; "I cried; they closed the doors; we searched everywhere. If you had seen my comrade when he came back! Every one told him the truth. He was like one who has lost his mind, ah! Messieurs! And to think that my daughter is to be married next week!"

Raveau read the man's account of his misery in a café at Arles.

The next day he sent the following letter, mailed

at a small station beyond Arles, to a commissaire of police in Paris. It ran as follows:

Learning in the papers of the great misfortune of the collector, Jules Bouvin, I enclose one thousand francs in his behalf.

Having enclosed two five hundred franc bank-notes in the yellow envelope of the café—the universal envelope of France—he dropped it in the letter-box.

It was not the first time that his good heart could not resist comforting his victim. Time and time again in his criminal career he had done the same thing. Seven years before, he once told an old friend, while sending a postal for fifty francs from a village post-office near Mantes, to a comrade in distress in Paris: “I noticed a young man next to me, waiting to send a registered letter. He was evidently a young farmer, or, rather, an apprentice to a farmer, since he was not yet twenty-one years of age. The post-office door opened and an old beggar entered. The beggar was noisy, incoherent, and half drunk. The few people in the post-office turned to regard him, to watch the chief of the bureau de poste remonstrate with him. He finally ended by giving two sous to the beggar and closed the door upon him. By this time the young farmer’s letter was in my pocket and I went leisurely out of the door.

“I ran after the thief. Twenty metres from the door I heard them cry, ‘Stop, thief!’ I ran, but unfortunately I slipped, fell, and fainted. Two gendarmes on their bicycles arrested me, but I had had

the presence of mind before they reached me to throw the letter into a ditch. It was difficult to decide by this time who was the thief, and every one was excited. I confessed that I was after him when I fell. Half the village was then after me. I accused the beggar who had disappeared and whom the young man had approached. The gendarmes searched me. They found on me two other post-office orders and several names of people whom I had decided to 'deal' with. In the inner pocket of my portfolio was the reproduction of a photograph of the famous agent of the secret police, Morin, whom I knew had long been after me. I had cut it out of a newspaper some weeks before and always carried it upon me. I tried when they arrested me to get it into my mouth to swallow it, but they were too quick for me and got hold of it, but they had not got the letter I had stolen, and I persistently denied everything. At this moment the young man whom I had stolen it from came up to me, crying bitterly. He told the crowd that he was about to send the registered letter to his old mother, who was ill and who depended upon it for her support. It contained all his savings. I had not the heart then not to tell him where I had thrown it. Even then under my calm and my strong denial of the theft he did not suspect me. Much as things were against me, since I was under arrest, I made up my mind to pay my debt to society. I still insisted it was the beggar, and that before I fell I had seen him cast a paper in a ditch, and I led them back

to the spot. The letter contained two thousand francs.

"I have always thought that my generosity saved me. I passed on trial before the Court of Assizes. The case was a complicated one without any positive proof, and at the end of the process I was acquitted."

Once the police awakened to a job in the neighbourhood, it meant, as he well knew, other gentlemen from headquarters searching for an accomplice of Vibert's. Innocent as he was of Vibert's present affairs, he knew the neighbourhood was not safe for him. During the few moments he remained alone at his table after the two inspectors and their charge had left, he was far more occupied in his mind with what excuse to give Babette for their sudden departure on the morrow than the itinerary of his flight. He dared not risk the straight voyage by express to Paris, and yet it was the big city, like most criminals seeking a hiding-place, that he decided to go to. He knew the city to be safer for a wanted man than the country. The affair at the post-office worried him. The theft had appeared in the papers and died out, and yet he knew, like similar robberies of its kind, the police often took months, even years, to get their man. Despite their theory that they could locate any man or woman in France, it was generally the crook who skipped to England, to New York, to Montreal, or the Orient, who fell badly during his flight. When a criminal flies to another country he

has even a harder game to deal with—the International Police—a system with the many heads of a hydra and the myriad tentacles of an octopus.

The system of International Police is also like a vast net: occasionally there is a break in the mesh for the victim to escape through, but seldom. Nine times out of ten it is folly to attempt it. Hire a yacht, if you will, your freedom will in any case be of short duration. The system is too general, too widespread, too perfect, and fraught with a thousand risks that the hunted man clinging to the neighbourhood of his misdemeanours does not have to cope with. The fox in the labyrinth of the wood he was born in is generally safe. It is when he goes abroad that he runs the gauntlet.

The man who steals is the slave of his theft. That which he has stolen becomes an enemy—a pleasing burden in the beginning, a spectre which haunts him to the end. Once having got it, it is a relief to spend it freely. He dare not entrust it to others, and to carry it upon himself means constant anxiety. Men change stolen money, as it were, in the dark. Often they bury it in the ground.

Raveau decided to secrete his in Paris—to hide it there.

Babette called to him from the top step of the short flight of stairs which led to her room.

“My dearest!”

And he went up to her, smiling, despite all that he had seen, and which was still haunting his mind, and

he dared not tell her at first of his sudden decision to leave on the morrow.

"You were so happy to-night when I arrived," he said to her as he bolted the door of their room, "that I had not the heart to tell you before dinner. We must go to Paris, dear, to-morrow night—not directly, either. It is on account of the wine affair," he explained to her. "I have some people to see, my little Babette. We must economize. I must tell thee that nearly all the money I have made must go back into the capital of our business. We shall be poor, my dearest."

"What does that matter?" was her answer. "We will arrange with what we have."

"Babette—we—we cannot go to our hotel. Do you understand?"

"What is the use in going to a hotel?" she replied. "You will see—we shall find a little place, and I shall do everything for you. You must not worry too much, my dearest. I know how to do things."

He gripped her by both arms.

"What if we went away! Away in Paris—lost in a small studio."

"Oh! Pierre!" she cried.

"Oh! a very little place," he went on to explain, "where the rent will be cheap; where we shall be alone—we two, with no one to bother us. In Montmartre I am certain we shall find it—four hundred francs a year rent."

With all her young heart she caught the spirit of his inspiration.

"No more dirty hotels," she sighed, and smiled up at him knowingly. "They are all alike, the hotels, my Pierre. One is better in one's own home, eh? Besides, I know how to manage things. You shall see how neat and clean it shall be—our house."

"It will be small," he declared honestly. "A room—a small studio."

They talked on with enthusiasm. Le Lavandou was to be abandoned. Her whole heart and mind now was on the new adventure. It would be ideal, she told him. It would be clean. That he was certain of. She would go to market.

"You shall see, my dearest, how many sous I shall save! Besides, one is better always in one's own home. It is terrible what we spend—you and I."

"You shall have a cage of canaries," he promised.

"Oh! Pierre! Do you know how I love little birds! I had a canary once, when I was little. Father gave it to me. He was so amusing; and do you know, he knew me. Poor Kri, Kri! He died."

Raveau took her in his arms.

"You shall have, besides, a little dog; he will keep you good company when I am away."

"And you, what will you do? Tell me, what?"

"Paint," said he.

"I had almost forgotten," she confessed. "You shall become famous, my Pierre."

"No compliments," he laughed into her dark eyes.

"Famous," she repeated. "I feel it! I know it!"

Madame Théron had to summon them to dinner.

The gelinottes were again waiting their pleasure.

"In a second!" called down Babette.

He released her. She smoothed back her hair and they descended the stairs together.

"Who were those men?" she asked as they took their seats at the small table spread for them in the corner of the café.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Commercial travellers," he assured her as he spread his napkin over his knees.

"And the gentleman who sat there opposite the others. He seemed ill."

"He was," said Raveau.

They commenced to eat the good soup of Madame Théron.

"Ah! that is better!" she sighed. They smiled into each other's eyes.

"If you knew how glad I am to get you back!" she whispered across to him. "It is not gay to be alone. I counted the hours."

"That does me good," said Madame Théron to herself, as she glanced at them, "She has the luck, that little one, to have got so good a husband."

Raveau's announcement to Madame Théron that night of their forced departure on the morrow was a real blow to that good soul.

Never had she had beneath her own and her husband's roof two more welcome guests. She was as

much in ignorance of Raveau's real personality as she was of Vibert's, whom one of the two men who had him in charge so discreetly handcuffed before leaving the inn that evening that even Madame Théron, who bowed them out of her door into the dark, did not notice that the prisoner's left hand was linked to the detective's.

The following day Raveau and Babette took the five o'clock train. There were tears in Madame Théron's black eyes.

Had she fallen in love with Raveau? It is quite possible that this was not far from the truth; yet there was no doubt as to her fondness for Babette.

They shook hands many times with their proprietress and Monsieur Théron. They promised not to forget them—to return some day; and all this eased a little the parting.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

IT IS thus that the guilty have to bury themselves. In three days, by a zigzag route, they were back in Paris—lost in a small hotel in Montmartre, close to the Boulevard de Clichy. Eventually they found the small studio they were looking for; it was directly over that of the sculptor Bara.

To have placed Babette in Montmartre was like having dropped a rosebud in the mud. Under the guardianship of a man like Raveau, who knew every phase of the underworld of Paris as well as a detective and Montmartre as well as its lowest criminal, Babette was safe from danger in an environment which is unique the world over, and which only one capital in the world possesses. Its name can never be changed. It is too well known. That which Raveau could not shield her from, however, was what she heard and saw in passing—the types and language of the street, so familiar to a Montmartois that they make and leave no impression.

Raveau knew Montmartre's many sides as well as one knows his own village. He knew both its rottenness and its worth, since Montmartre has produced much of the beautiful in art. It has as well fostered, nursed, screened, and safely refuged most of the

worst element in Paris. It is both pure and unclean, and its uncleanness, morally and physically, is savage and appalling. Montmartre knows but one goal, one ideal—if it can be called an ideal—Pleasure, as long as a sou remains in one's pocket, and since Pleasure becomes a tyrant to the indolent, it is graded to suit the greedy. Its gamut runs from the height of extravagance to the abyss of misery. Even in the abyss Pleasure is still lurking, still omnipresent, as ingeniously sought for and got as vice or a drug.

Montmartre has the reputation of being gay. It is as sad as a sewer: all the misery conceivable in human life, all the poverty, the hunger, the wretchedness and disease, crime leading to desperation, desperation leading to crime; lies, hate, and filth. Spectres of vice and immorality form the yearly harvest of Montmartre—a harvest of humanity whose territory by day is a dingy carcass of cafés, studios, shops, cabarets, music-halls, and by night a cleverly electric-lighted hell! Thousands of provincial girls as innocent and pure as Babette have fallen into this hell, and once having fallen, rarely escape from it. They may have brighter periods in their short lives when fortune, like a good fairy, rescues them for a time from their sordid bondage, but they almost invariably return to it when they are no longer young enough, or pretty enough, for fortune to pass with more than a condescending and rather annoyed glance of recognition.

A Frenchwoman does not make acquaintances

without her husband's consent, and Babette was no exception, her acquaintances being limited at this period to her concierge, the creamery woman where she bought her eggs and milk, and the wives of the butcher and the grocer.

Let us be just. Let us look closely into Montmartre as Raveau knew it, as it *is*, not as it is not. Get back of the scenes, as it were, and wipe off the rouge.

Montmartre is the playground of the devil.

Only when you live in it daily, for years, do the nights you spend in its gayety become fewer, since gayety is the mother of remorse, and to be gay at night one must suffer in the morning.

Montmartre has drawn the whole world to its doors: the pauper, the prince, the gentleman, the outcast girl, the student, the murderer, the old lady who has never seen it before, and the young girl who is glad she saw it for once.

There are, besides these people before the scenes, others behind them. They are the ones who make the money. The rest spend it.

In no municipal section in the world have wine and women reaped a more satisfactory harvest, though the wine is rather rarer than the women, as it always is.

Like a hand uplifted above iniquity, the basilica of the Sacré Coeur stands preëminent above this great sordid quarter of amusement.

It seems to say: "Look you, below there is a hell! I am the Light."

When the glow of the dying sun strikes the masonry of the great church crowning Paris with its Oriental dome, it becomes like a pink pearl. It is beautiful from afar. It dominates in its beauty. Often the young girl raises her eyes, for a brief moment, even in her sin, and crosses herself. On dark nights, and there are many, the Sacré Cœur is invisible, and they forget about its existence. In the moonlight it regains its beauty. No one that I have ever known personally has ever been inside of it.

If you are addicted to a monocle and an automobile go forth and climb the hill of Pleasure, and do not quarrel if your third bottle of champagne has been reserved for you during the half-hour you have grown sentimental over Friquette, or Marcelle; and if the next day you vaguely recall your champagne smacked of soda and white wine, you can still remember, I hope, the label and the price.

And do not blame Montmartre for this. Its business at night is to make money. In the daytime it is quite different. The life of Montmartre in the daytime passes, as it were, *en famille*, among friends; they reserve the stranger and his gold for the evening.

In the early morning, even close up to noon, Montmartre is a deserted village, save for the market carts up the rue Lepic and along the rue des Abbesses, where the chattering women in wrappers, curl papers, and bedroom slippers bargain for meat and vegetables. One must be really hungry to market along the rue des Abbesses. There are delicacies, such as the

bloody bodies of dead rabbits, mule meat, horse meat, bunches of thyme, sizzling fried potatoes, pungent and hot in their lard, carrots, salads, and potatoes, and very dead glass-eyed fish, all bawled out to you, shovelled out to you, wrapped up for you in newspapers sensational with crime, bargained for, paid for, while the butchers shout before their shops like barkers in front of a sideshow.

"Allons, Mesdames! Step up—they are going fast! The best in the house, my little lady! Smell that—seventy-five centimes!" he bawls, tossing the purchased cut like a baseball to his assistant in the back of the shop, who catches it deftly and wraps it up.

"Allons! Mesdames! step lively—two francs twenty," and a rump steak flies through the air, and is caught again by the butcher's boy, whose curly hair seems to have been pomaded with suet. Ah, they work quick, and the smell of the cheeses is awful.

"And who is that?"

"It is Thérèse—no, it is Aline! Impossible! it must be Friquette! Not that little beauty who danced the tango at the Abbaye Theleme?"

"The same."

"You can see the various shades of blond dye in her hair, she wears a calico wrapper, her feet are in felt slippers, and her black open-work stockings are out at the heel."

"Good morning, Friquette!"

A collarless gentleman, immaculately shaven, with

a pale face and an evil eye, is close at her elbow, a fellow in an imitation English homespun suit and a false diamond ring, a snake with a diamond head. It was indiscreet of us to speak to Friquette. She cooks his meals daily—and pays for them. There is no charge for the cooking, either. Without her he would starve to death. Sometimes he gives her a black eye, and she cries and forgives him.

This fellow in his cheap suit hulks his great shoulders like a fighter through the marketing crowd. He is in felt slippers. There is nothing on Friquette but her wrapper, her hair, her stockings, her slippers, and her chemise. On her consort is a knife and a Browning revolver of the latest pattern; neither are visible. Both Friquette bought for him.

And so this is Friquette, who the young and honorable Reginald Ponsby, Jr., fell in love with last night in the maze of gayety at the Royal, where she danced, or was it at the Princess? or the Moulin Rouge? or the Grelot? Ponsby cannot remember. He remembers only that she was a dear and unlike the rest, almost pathetic. Ponsby's generosity is now in the pocket of her consort. They are bargaining for a rabbit. Friquette's lips are still carmined; the rouge, however, is off her cheeks, but the black pencil-line on her eyelashes still remains. It is not considered "chic" to go to market dead-white, but in her consort's hard face there still lurks a vestige of powder after his clean shave—Friquette's powder.

Not even as late as ten o'clock are the cafés, smelling of yesterday, cleaned up after the night, and in running order. As late as eleven, in many, the waiter still has his napkin knotted around his neck, wiping the seats, sawdusting the floor, sanding the terrace, and polishing the brass fittings, which seems useless, but which are the pride of every café in France to keep as brilliant as a new sou. By eleven a few early risers have drifted in for an absinthe, less rarely consumed than you may suppose, or a mild vermouth à l'eau, or a coffee. Along the Boulevard de Clichy some of these early risers are still in very little more than they got up with, save the disguise of a pair of felt slippers, coat, and trousers. They are mostly of the idle criminal class, living upon women. By noon the fat, perspiring, and importantly busy merchant arrives, overweighted with red blood, fat, and responsibility, for a game of manille or dominoes with three or four old cronies. They déjeuner together; and you may be sure they eat heartily. No affair, however important, must interfere with their déjeuner. It is sacred. If the déjeuner is somewhat bad in quality, and thoroughly bourgeois in its sauciful and resourceful cooking, it can compliment itself upon its generous quantity and its modest price, for these brasseries—cafés—restaurants—are here to feed daily the inhabitants of Montmartre, not the stranger of the all-night restaurants, where neither the cooking nor the quality is extraordinary, and the price gauges according to the

maître d'hôtel's keen opinion of the wealth of the victim by the time he has finished.

But it is now only half-past noon. Most of the little women of Montmartre are still asleep, and only a rare few, whose lives do not compel them to reach their domicile at six in the morning, stroll into the café of the red-faced commerçant for déjeuner, with, shall we say, Monsieur X. or Monsieur Z. Neither care much to déjeuner near the door. One or the other lunches with Mademoiselle Fifi, far back in a gloomy corner, where both can talk unheard and undisturbed. It is quite likely that Monsieur Z. does not at all approve of the café of the red-faced commerçant, but much prefers the one farther down the boulevards, owing to Mademoiselle Fifi being of the same opinion, whereas it is likewise certain that the brasserie on the Place Pigalle suits exactly Mademoiselle Fifi and Monsieur X. Thirdly, that often an old gentleman, largely due to Mademoiselle Fifi's opinion, prefers to breakfast with her at a smaller café close to the Place Blanche. These things I cannot say are of daily occurrence, since Fifi naturally cannot be in three places at the same time.

Through it all Fifi preserves her sangfroid and her sentiment. She is absolutely convincing. She is a great actress. Never a scene, but getting to her little poetic result slowly.

To know an atmosphere, we must know thoroughly the types who inhabit it. Let us take time at our leisure, as it is always taken in Montmartre. Besides,

it is scarcely yet one o'clock; neither a depressing fête day nor a Sunday (the family day in Montmartre), but a warm, lazy, sunny day, when most of the great men in art are asleep in their sock feet on their worn divans of their studios, and the few white puffs of clouds that appeared at noon have an hour ago sailed gayly over the dome of the Sacré Coeur, leaving Paris free under a blue sky. French blue it is called on the palette. Strange as it may seem, the word "galette," which is the argotic word for "money" is so close to "palette" that it only misses the elimination of the *g* and the substitution of a *p*.

And yet palette is the symbol of the painter, whose goal nine times out of nine and a half in these modern days is "la galette."

Never was Art a harder profession by which to obtain the wherewithal to eat and sleep than it is to-day; life, even to a Bohemian, even to the rapin of Montmartre, has nearly tripled itself in cost. Parisian life has changed; it has almost meant death to the Bohemian. He or she is obliged to spend a gold louis now, when even a few years ago wealth, wine, and happiness could be got for a few francs. All this has led to grave cravings, to smart clothes, to automobiles, to a thousand minor luxuries which modern life demands, and which you unconsciously fall a victim to.

There is little of the old cheap Bohemian life left in Montmartre among the poorest. Even that is dear. It crowds them into forgotten streets, into

blind alleys. Misery drives one into obscure places. It is a cruel torturer, and Mimi Pinson no longer tidies up her garret and sings over it for her lord and master. She goes down on the spur of the moment to the rue Fontaine, buys a hat with a real plume, a plain tailor-made of the latest pattern and according to the latest mode; trips along down to the grand boulevards for a pair of high-heeled American shoes with cloth tops, purchases a hand-embroidered waist, and walks back to the Butte one hundred and eighty-five francs in debt in monthly installments—all save the shoes.

Very well; that is the way it is nowadays.

And she tells every one in the afternoon ball at the Moulin Rouge how much she has paid for it, too.

“And the monsieur said when he sold me my dress, ‘I could not duplicate it, Mademoiselle, for three hundred francs.’”

“And thy shoes?” pipes up Emélie, whose own are worn out.

“Let me see them, thou——” demands Villon, the painter, at the same table.

Mimi puts up her small foot.

“Very well, my child, they are chic.”

“And they! they are solid,” adds Villon, holding her trim foot in his big hand.

“How much?”

“Five ‘tunes’” (twenty-five francs).

“They are not dear,” intervene in chorus four less fortunate girls.

"Oh! well! for me they were not given," declares Emélie.

Villon drops the small foot out of his hand.

"Don't complain," he says, patting Mimi on her cheek. "You got them for a bargain; they are truly chic."

"Oh!" cried Mimi, as the orchestra strikes into a polka. "Come, Emélie, dance with me—allons!" And the two rush down to the clean ballroom floor.

Villon smiles to the sculptor Duphot, seated at his elbow.

"She is a good girl—Mimi," he remarks. "She is as happy as a child with her new wardrobe, but she paid too much for the shoes. Tiens! there is Bautrin, the brother of Emile."

"How are you, my old one!"

"What's new?" asked Duphot.

"Nothing very great," sighs Bautrin. Pulling off his overcoat, he folds it compactly and plants it on top of Duphot's and Villon's, beneath which is the ulster of Lucette, and the only piece of fur Henriette possesses, and which resembles the mantle of an entire cat, tucked beneath; the worn coat of Fifine, on top of which is a package belonging to Thérèse, a purchase that afternoon, over which is folded the red-silk, satin-lined jacket of Emélie. To have left all these at the "vestiaire" would have cost five sous. They are absolutely safe with their old friends, the artists, who do not dance, and all of whom they have posed for.

On top of Bautrin's overcoat now lie three hand-sacks, Emélie's, Manon's, and the new one of Germaine. They are likewise safe, and they contain a varied collection of things of vital importance to their owners: all the money they possess, powder-puffs, keys, letters, and the inevitable tiny mirror, the carmine stick for the lips, and the black pencil for the eyes. Their owners are strolling about or dancing with no more concern as to the safety of their belongings than if they were locked in a vault in the Bank of France.

By the artists' table files the idle, moving drift of the ball—all kinds, and all kinds of types, a current of social conditions. Seldom is there a fight, a dispute, or a disturbance, and when there is, every one gets up good-humouredly to see the fun, to hear the laughter, the satirical remarks, and see the offender rushed by the collar out through a side door by the bouncer and into the hands of the waiting police.

And their discretion is such that rarely do these little waifs of Bohemia ask for anything. It is neither considered discreet nor polite, only when they are absolutely in need, and then, oh! for so little! A whispered word in the ear of a painter.

"Listen, my old one! I had to pay for my room to-day, and have had no breakfast. If you could possibly let me have enough for my dinner!" And the painter out of what little still remains in his pocket slips two francs, often three, into Lucette's grateful hand, and she goes away as happy as a lark

—to a waltz, or a mazurka. Emélie, she learns, had not a sou left, either. Lucette will divide her dinner with Emélie.

It is very easy, on the rue Lepic, at a certain restaurant, with its up and down stairs, crowded at tables so they touch elbows, and where dinner is a franc twenty-five centimes. Very well, Lucette will order the dinner and Emélie will sit opposite, and Lucette will divide, feeding her little comrade piecemeal across the narrow table, sharing their wine out of the same glass. There are several in the room doing the same thing; no one thinks it unusual, not even the proprietor. Possibly, the next night Emélie will do the honours to Lucette; but the next night is a long way off, and both may be rich by then.

Seldom at the ball do they ask for a drink. If perchance Francine has been purchased a grenadine à l'eau, or a beer, it is safe to say she will share it with a comrade, often two. If her glass stands waiting for her while she leaves the table to dance, Thérèse and Fifi may discover it in passing, ask to whom it belongs, and when informed it is Francine's, each take a discreet sip out of it, knowing that Francine will not care, and always leaving a generous portion for its owner.

A strong man could not exist under these conditions of privation and economy. The vitality of these little sparrows of the Montmartre is beyond belief. Their resistance against cold, hunger, and fatigue is astonishing; thin slippers, thin stockings, often only a

chemise, a hat, and a robe open at the neck, and a thin robe at that, in weather that men turn the collars of their thick overcoats up in and walk fast.

If rarely they demand, still more rarely do they steal, or lie. To steal from whom? From their friends the artists? A crime unutterable! From whom, then? From young Reginald with the monocle? They seldom if ever enter these restaurants. They are too poorly dressed. If Reginald becomes a victim, he falls under the hand of the professional—a far different class of young woman, who belongs to the night life of Montmartre, designed for the stranger.

Who then are these little sparrows of Montmartre, who live on next to nothing, are polite, generous, and never demand? They are the great-grandchildren of the grizette. Their great-grandmothers passed away in the time of Henri Mürger. They have inherited, however, that Bohemian spirit and honesty of the grizette. They have retained the frankness of her mind, for they tell you everything, they disguise nothing in their lives, and they rarely speak ill of others. They possess their own small sentiments, their own little dignity, their own morals. You may say they have none. In the modern accepted sense they have none at all. There are, however, many sides to morality. There is also a vast chasm between immorality and unmorality. The former is a question of ignorance, or the lack of knowing the difference between right and wrong; any more than

their parents before them, they may be said to be unmoral—parents who have let them shift for themselves, worthless parents who have in some cases made a semblance of setting them to work as apprentices to a dressmaker—a blanchisseuse—a “little hand” in this or that business, and afterward abandoned them. Were it not for the painters and sculptors, many would long ago have starved to death. It is to them that they come for good advice when discouraged, when ill, when in the grip of misery, when the rent of their miserable cold little rooms high up in some even more forlorn apology for an hotel is unpaid, and they are afraid in going in and out to say “good morning” to the landlord.

If in the winter few rise before five in the afternoon there is much philosophy in this, since at five the balls open their doors, and both entrance and the warmth within are free—a “paradise” where they meet all their friends daily.

It cannot be seven o'clock, and yet Bautrin, who has just handed back Céleste her hand-sack and very carefully extracted from the pile her only manteau, assures her that it is, by the gold watch of his father, and in half an hour the ball will be over, the splendidly lighted white ballroom dark, and the iron gates at the entrance closed; and yet it is still gay enough; the band playing a tango, but very few know how to dance it—yelling and screaming for a waltz.

“Bis! Bis! Encore!” every one yells.

Some embrace, some shake hands until to-morrow.

Everything seems to pass *en famille*, and indeed it is a big family, the like of which never existed outside of Montmartre and never will.

The painters and the sculptors at the table pay their respective bills—ten sous each—and two sous to the excellent and most intelligent waiter. “Ah, yes, it was forgotten—a Chambery fraise for Tinette, and a beer for Thérèse, and the coffee and cream for Made-moiselle Manon,” reminds the waiter respectfully.

“True!” cry Villon and Duphot. “Et voilà!” and they are paid for.

The vestiaire of the painters is now reduced to the overcoats of the painters, eight or ten or twelve by this time, who have arrived during the ball.

“At last!” It is seven-thirty, and the big throng, often close to a thousand strong, stream out through the broad corridor into the open air. Whew! it is fresh and smells good.

It is time to dine. Duphot turns and catches sight by chance of Marie at his elbow:

“Come along my child—to dinner!”

She tucks her hand under his arm and says wistfully in a voice that is very low:

“How nice you are to me!”

Then she hesitates and half draws back.

“Henriette is with me—we came out together,” she explains. “It would not be nice in me to leave her, poor girl!”

“Very well! go and get Henriette then.”

“Eh, Bautrin! Eh, Villon!”

They wave to him and push through the group.

"Wait!" cries Villon. "I must get the *Liberté*," and he rushes off for his favourite newspaper, which he generally reads over his soup, then returns, and with Henriette linked between Villon and Bautrin, and Duphot ahead with Marie, they walk up the Boulevard Clichy and turn up a steep side street to a small restaurant where every one knows each other and where Henriette, Marie, Villon, Bautrin, and Duphot will remain late at table trying to mingle art, love, and politics in one tremendous discussion.

It is night.

Montmartre is ready for the stranger.

The all-night restaurants around the Place Blanche and the Place Pigalle and down the rue Fontaine are ready for the night's work. The paid dancing girls get into their skirts, glittering in emerald-green, ruby, and sapphire-coloured scales, slip on their silk socks and patent-leather slippers with imitation diamond buckles, powder their calves, their knees, and the rest of the décolleté that goes with the short dancing skirt; rouge their cheeks, their ears, carmine their lips, pencil their eyes, and gossip among themselves. The band of French and Italian Tziganes are in readiness, too. So is the kitchen. The wine in the coolers and the maître d'hôtel in his white tie—all in waiting for the stranger.

Rarely do they ever get a Frenchman within the

door, save now and then the Parisian youth spending his patrimony.

Out of the lights of this manufactured gayety the night hides another class—that riff-raff of Montmartre, the criminal, the wretched, and the desperate; the gigolette and her gigolo; the apache and the girl waiting in the alley; vermin of the dark; the dregs of night; but I have yet to know of a single painter or Bohemian who has ever been molested. Many of these so-called apaches earn a modest living by appearing in all their “dangerous” personality in the all-night restaurants. The warfares of these famous bands of ruffians occur mostly among themselves over the rivalry of a girl, or against the police. In comparison to New York, or Chicago, Paris is a safe city. The rich drunkard who is robbed you can find anywhere. In Paris there are few crimes more heavily punished than “theft.”

It was this life, then, that Raveau knew, and knowing, wished to guard Babette from.

CHAPTER TWENTY

HAD Raveau hunted for months for a small domicile hidden away from the noise and glitter in Montmartre he could not have found a safer or more modest refuge for Babette than the small studio directly over that of the sculptor Bara.

One winter's night Bara, having gone down his short, narrow, steep flight of stairs leading to the cobbled court below, to fill a stone jug with water at the courtyard's spigot, said to himself as he filled it in the pouring rain: "I shall not leave." He had been offered that week a bigger studio at the same price in the rue Henri Monnier. That was over twenty-two years ago.

Very little had changed since the night I speak of when Bara refilled his jug. The aspect of the place was the same, it was situated upon a forgotten street—a street which had never attained its full growth (a short cut to the highroad off Montmartre), and whose ramshackle flanks of buildings—some low, some higher, all disappointing to the passerby—had an air about them of having never pleased their occupants.

When you looked in from the street through the

half-open door, giving on a vista of the small cobbled courtyard beyond, your eye caught rapidly all that it contained, including the black cat at the portal. The cramped, dingy "loge" of the concierge was on the right. A shadeless kerosene lamp burned in this box of a place, in which the feather-bed took up most of the room. When it grew too dark to knit the stockings of her daughter without it, the lamp was lighted. The concierge, too, had been there twenty years. There was also a low shed just beyond on the heavy cobbles where they made—"crics." What are "crics" in English? Ah, yes! I know—jacks—jack-screws, to put under wagons and things and lift them; and opposite to it on the right was a box of a place, painted in imitation bricks and imitation timbers, all painted like the slapstick acrobatic house on the music-hall stage. One expected any moment to see both clowns tumble out of the flipflop windows and doors—those doors that spring back into place after the double somersault, baffling the pursuer.

Nothing of the kind. It was a theatrical school. A very small one to be sure, but all day long they rehearsed within heavy tragedy, and taught stage-struck young ladies gesture, naturalness, and declamation. Some of these ladies even arrived in luxurious automobiles.

Now and then, during the lulls in rehearsals, the young professional tragedian in charge, with the worried white forehead and the long hair, would

stroll out into the courtyard to smoke a cigarette and talk to the cat. It must have been a relief.

Nothing, however, worried Bara, whose studio was directly over the embryo dramatic factory, up the narrow flight of stairs in fact, the door to the left, upon which was nailed a card:

Gaspard Bara—Sculptor.

It was a small, modest brown door, that had a genial habit of opening wide to the stranger who knocked—wide—not parsimoniously on a crack. Its cracks were beneath it and above, and half-way up one side, which the wind got through, and almost the head of the cat—and Bara loved that cat, as he loved all animals, as he loved every one who was sincere, for every one loved him.

His heart was in the right place. It had always been. That magician with his bronze and his clay was never too busy to give a poor girl advice, or a small piece of silver. Never in anger, save when you touched upon the insincere in life. Ah! then, you should have seen Bara! His smooth, round, clean-shaven face, the face of a priest, became alive—alive with earnestness. His keen black eyes, wide apart, gleamed with intelligence; his short, broad-shouldered stature seemed to grow in height, despite his sixty years. He had a fine hand, and his gestures were convincing, for he was a man of rare experience and intelligence, with an unusual knowledge outside of his fine art of many things. Far more than a smat-

tering in the science of mechanics, literature, and medicine, well-grounded in psychology and chemistry. He, in his black coat buttoned close to the rim of his collar, with his round soft black felt hat, his black voluminous trousers, his buckled shoes with a strap across the instep, and, despite his age, his straight black hair—the hair of an Indian—without a streak of gray in it, and the ribbon of the *Légion d'Honneur* in his buttonhole—a man who never did a mean thing in his life—Voilà!—such was Gaspard Bara!

The studio itself was modest, like Bara: a single room some fifteen feet by twelve, the brown door screened by a curtain, a worn divan under a dusty skylight, two wooden chairs, a very old piano with yellow keys and a sleigh bell tone, and a table heaped with papers, pamphlets, and sketches, some books, and the walls covered from ceiling to floor with the framed sketches of other great men, some of them long dead. Next to the round little stove, a square model stand, and a tripod with an unfinished statuette in clay, and upon the shelf dozens of other statuettes, of nudes, of monks, of peasants—some in bronze, some in terre cuite; medallions, portraits in wax, details of larger works in plaster, legs, thighs, torsos, hands and feet—to-day a half life-sized nude figure of a young girl in clay, ready to go to the founder's to be cast in bronze, stood beneath the skylight. The stove beneath it was as well known among the little models of Montmartre as was Bara's welcome.

Time passed until the day arrived, early in spring,

when Raveau and Babette moved into the small studio above Bara's.

One morning Babette, coming down the stairs, passed Bara's door, which was ajar, and glanced in in passing.

Bara was working on a statuette with his back to her. He was alone. More from childish curiosity than lack of discretion, Babette hesitated on the landing. She had never seen the interior of a sculptor's studio before. The sketches, the statuettes, the unfinished work covered with wet cloths, all were new to her.

At this moment Bara turned and caught sight of her. Babette half caught her breath, flushed, and would have gone back to her own door had not Bara smiled, and, bowing to her, said: "Bon jour, Madame! I see we are neighbours." Then he advanced to his brown door ajar, and said pleasantly, "I have not had the honour of meeting Monsieur, but I have lived here a long while—many years—all of twenty, I may say," and added graciously, "From the time you were born, Madame. If at any time I can be of service to Monsieur or yourself, I trust you will not hesitate to let me know."

"My husband, I know, if he were here, would thank you, Monsieur, for your kindness," replied Babette.

True enough, Bara's quick eye caught sight of the plain gold wedding ring on Babette's hand. Her two words—"my husband"—made him raise his eyes in surprise. Husbands and wives were a rarity to him.

He had almost forgotten in his long Bohemian life that such things existed, that there were such young women as Babette—pure as a rose and as gentle. She smiled, and began to talk to him more at her ease in far purer French than Bara's.

"My husband is also an artist," she announced to him with an ill-disguised touch of pride. "He paints beautifully. Some day, Monsieur, you shall see his work."

"Ah!" said Bara. "Then he is one of us. I thought Monsieur was in—pardon my indiscretion—I did not know exactly, but I surmised in some business."

"My husband was a merchant in wines," she told him frankly, "but he abandoned it for painting."

Nothing could have pleased Bara more than this. He had a horror of people who sold their birthright, their genius, to commonplace business.

He ran his hand through his straight black hair, pushing it back over his broad white forehead, and smiled with a smile of satisfaction as he said to her:

"Your husband has reason. No one but the mediocre go into business. Business is as bad as politics. It is for the strong heads—the big vegetables—eh! When business is dead and forgotten, Art still lives."

"Ah!" exclaimed Babette.

"Yes, my child, it still lives."

She started at the word "child."

"Pardon, Madame," he said in a kindly, fatherly way, which won her heart. "I am so used to calling

every one 'my child,' you will forgive me. You are not a Parisienne—am I not right? No one in Paris speaks such pure French.”

“I am from Tourraine,” declared Babette. “It is not long that I have been married. Do you know Tourraine? I am from near Tours—at La Fourche. My father is guardian of the prison. I was born there.”

“In prison? It is not possible, Madame!” exclaimed Bara.

She laughed.

“It is very old,” she told him. “The prison—father knows all its history,” and unconsciously she found herself moving nearer the threshold of the brown door.

Bara moved, too, entranced before this rare little person, the frank light in whose eyes, her healthy complexion, free from artificiality, her sterling simplicity, grace, and charm, made him even now feel awkward.

“Enter, Madame, I pray you!” he stammered, and ran for a chair. “Be seated, I implore you! There! We shall leave the door open, and when your husband arrives, whom I need not tell you it will be a double pleasure for me to meet, we shall have had at least a little chat as neighbours.”

“I fear I must be going,” she said timidly, as she reached the threshold, and gazed again at the wonders within. “I—I have my housework to do.”

“You can do it to-morrow,” said Bara, who only

did his once a week. "If you were a sculptress you would not bother about housework; the clay-dust gets into everything; that is why I keep my tobacco in this jar. There! you see?" he smiled, lifting the cover. "It is clean inside; no dust can get in."

Babette now found herself seated in one of the two wooden chairs beneath the skylight, Bara taking the piano stool, which was covered with faded green rep and which creaked under his short, stocky weight as he sat down. Babette was beginning to think him charming. She was conscious that she was looking into his eyes and was perfectly at her ease, as if he had been her father or her uncle, or some member of her family. Perhaps the tiny scarlet ribbon in the lapel of his black coat, buttoned tight with many buttons, the last of them securing the high collar beneath his chin, impressed her, too. She recalled in her mind the military medal of her father. It was much handsomer, she concluded, than the Légion d'Honneur; and he, quick to catch the drift of her mind and her young eyes, said to her modestly, with his broadest grin, so broad that you would never have taken him then for a comedian:

"It amuses you—the little ribbon, eh?"

"One must be very good and very great to have that," said she.

Bara threw back his head and laughed outright.

"Good! Great!" he exclaimed. "Yes, there are some who have it who are good and great, as you say, but there are a lot of sacré individuals—'les canailles,'

the politicians, the 'big vegetables,' the 'pears,' chocolate merchants, bad bankers, and worse financiers, who do nothing for art; even, my dear little lady, if you were to count all the individuals now in prison who have worn this little ribbon in their buttonholes—ah! mon Dieu!"

"My husband has one," she returned simply.

"Diable!" exclaimed Bara. "Forgive me—a thousand pardons! I did not mean to insinuate—only to tell you that in Paris one is often distinguished who has not been decorated. They gave it to your husband for his painting?" he ventured.

"Oh, no," returned Babette, leaning forward in her chair, her small hands folded in her lap. "It was for his industry in the wine business. He is very wise in the big affairs—only, you understand, we are no longer rich, for nearly all the money my husband made had to go to support the capital of his wine interest in Bordeaux. It is thus we are here. You make beautiful things," she added, suddenly turning and gazing about her at the statuettes on the shelves.

"One makes what one can," he replied, with a modest shrug. "If your husband permits me, I should like some day to make a little portrait in clay of you, Madame."

Babette's face lighted up.

"Oh!" she cried, "if you would. It must be wonderful to be able to photograph some one like this," her old word still sticking to her when she described either painting or sculpture, and then, like a child,

she wanted to know how long it would take, how still she must keep, was she beautiful enough. Alas! she was like all other girls, she told him, seeing very little difference between any, and he told her she *was* beautiful, and she raised her eyes wistfully to his own in genuine surprise.

And he, with his hands planted on his knees, assured her again that she was, and just then Raveau came springing up the narrow stairs, saw the open door, recognized Babette, lifted his hat, and entered.

"Well! my dearest!" Raveau said to Babette cheerily, and turning to Bara added with a smile and an outstretched hand which Bara grasped, "Monsieur, we are neighbours."

"A thousand pardons," exclaimed Bara, "if I seem to have forced an acquaintance. I must be frank. Madame passed my door, and I know you will understand my opening it wide to so charming a lady. Be seated, I pray you!"

They were friends in a moment. In Bohemia, especially among Bohemians, it does not take long to make friends.

"Be seated," reiterated Bara.

"Wait," exclaimed Raveau, with a gesture. "If I am not indiscreet, Monsieur, ah! what talent," and he, like Babette, ran his eye over the shelves full of beautiful bronzes.

"One makes what one can," reiterated Bara modestly, and taking down, carefully, a small statuette, he placed it upon the corner of his working tripod,

uncovered the head of the nymph, moved her slim, sinuous body better into the light, and stood back that Raveau and Babette might see the better.

And they saw—the grace and youth in this nude dancing figure, the slimness, the muscles, the dimples, and the line. Raveau noticed also the abandon of this little nymph, for no one can make as well a nymph dancing as Bara.

“But it is superb!” cried Raveau with enthusiasm.

“You find it so?” returned Bara with a grin full of good-humour.

“Is it not beautiful?” exclaimed Babette, not knowing why.

“It is the little Henriette,” explained Bara. “I knew her when she was a blanchisseuse. She is wonderful, that infant! Look at the finesse of her knees, her small hands, her hips placed right—one does not often find that.”

He put it back on the shelf.

“It is a long while, Monsieur, that you have been a sculptor?” ventured Raveau, following the superb little statuette with his keen eyes until it safely regained its resting-place on the shelf.

“All my life, Monsieur. One must have some aim in life. I try to make my statuettes alive. It is better to make a small thing well than a large thing badly. Sit down, I pray you! Unhappily I have nothing to offer you, but will you smoke?”

“You have offered us enough,” returned Raveau graciously. “So few offer their talent and their

brains, Monsieur. I am glad to see," laughed Raveau as he rose and peered into a cabinet of bronzes, "that you are still—that you still believe in reproducing nature as we see it."

"Ah! the cubists—the futurists! Ah, mon Dieu!" Bara threw back his head and roared. "Ah! the sacréd farceurs!" he laughed. "I am glad *you* do not believe in them—listen to me! True art is dead for the time being. Art is in the hands of mountebanks, of clowns. They amuse the public with the impossible. No drawing, no perspective, no beauty, no form, no composition; it is crazy—all that, and they know it, and they sell those impossible nightmares."

"To whom?" inquired Raveau with a smile of interest.

"To fools," returned Bara briefly. "Women wear blue-green hair nowadays; it is the mode—and Persian gowns. They dress like monkeys. Very well, there must be a background for all that foolery. Ah! Imagine the interior decoration that must go with it! The sofa cushions, the pictures!" and he roared again, his keen, small black eyes half closed in his broad grin, a grin which was full of satire. Then, suddenly growing serious, he turned to Babette and said, leaning forward on the piano-stool with his clever hands planted firmly on his knees: "And now, Madame, tell me, since your husband is here, when may I have the pleasure of making a little portrait of you, that I may have the double pleasure of presenting it to you with my compliments?"

Babette turned and looked at Raveau inquiringly for permission, flushed by the compliment of the master.

"Whenever you please," declared Raveau heartily. "You are much too good, really, Monsieur."

"Then we shall say to-morrow, eh? At ten in the morning."

Babette was radiant.

"You are content?" said Raveau, patting her smooth cheek.

"Oh, yes!" she said softly in her delight. To pose for Bara for her neck and shoulders and head—was she pretty enough? How would she do her hair? she thought. And she asked him this before she left.

"Just as it is, Madame," he said in his kindly, paternal way, watching Raveau the while, knowing that he had his permission, that he approved; knowing well that he believed in him, since they were brother artists, and he smiled as Babette glanced at herself in the old-fashioned mirror over the worn piano as they took their leave and the master closed the door upon them.

"What charming neighbours," said Bara to himself, his skilled hands already busy with his unfinished statuette. "She is delicious, charming! He, too—the lucky one!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

HOW many models have been up and down that short flight of stairs, to find him in or out! I do not know—legions of them. Bara called them all “thou.” They were all his children. They made themselves at home in his box of a studio—often a half-dozen at a time, and while he worked on, they never disturbed him. The stove was a great comfort in winter. Sometimes there were cakes, but never anything to drink, but there was Bara’s pipe tobacco, and those who smoked could roll their own cigarettes. Besides, there was a pair of curling irons, which in winter the stove was always willing to heat for them, and a mirror, the delight of every woman. Some of these girls had never seen each other before, but the brown door always opened to admit them with Bara’s cheery “Bon jour mon enfant!” “Ça va?” They were all friends in a few minutes, however, telling each other most of their lives. They were all Montmartoises. Sometimes for weeks they stored things on the shelves. Fifine, who trimmed her hats with the English material from the cast-off trousers of Framond the painter, often kept as many as two hats on the shelf in the closet. Fifine had, since she had left working for the

blanchisseuse on the rue Pigalle, developed a passion for circus life, and had fallen in love with several (to her) notable clowns. She had been a clown herself, and was proud of her ability as a tumbler.

"Look! my old one! how easily I can stand on my head!" was a favourite expression of Fifine's, though she generally chose the divan to do the trick on, and which sagged and creaked under the slim weight of her twenty years. She adored her daughter, a tot of three.

"Later, if I can," Fifine used to say, "I am going to bring her to Paris—and have her educated, but until then I shall leave her with the good woman in the country. Paris is no place to bring up a child in; the milk and the eggs are never as good as they are in the country, and, besides, it costs dear, only one must have some education. I was forced to work too young, but I can read and write! That is the principal thing, isn't it? Look!" and seizing a torn end of one of Bara's sketches, she would write with a soft pencil her name and address with slow persistence and a quick flourish:

Fifine Dutremont,
Hôtel des Trois Etoiles,
2, bis Passage du Jour,
Paris. E. V. IX arrondissement.

But in the matter of education no one could have been more sincere than Marguerite, a tall, slim, blonde with pensive gray eyes. For weeks she had carried

under her arm a volume as worn as her faded ulster, the history of France, which she read while posing, and confessed that one of her greatest pleasures when her day's work in the studios was done was to smoke a pipe in bed. "It is cheaper than cigarettes," declared Marguerite, for she considered cigarettes a great extravagance, and in the matter of economy Marguerite often asked permission to crush into powder the point of a blue pencil to make up the lids of her eyes. Marguerite's real ambition, however, was to travel, to see something of the great world beyond the fortifications, and finally she saw not only most of France, but a large part of Switzerland, Italy, and Spain, for a painter with a snug fortune fell in love with her. On her return she was addressed as "Madame." There were, too, the sisters Yvette and Margot, who settled their quarrels by flying at each other like cats with their claws, but who were careful never to scratch each other's face, a sort of sisterly code of honour between them, both being blonde and pretty. Then there was serious little Toinette, who lived alone, covered up her cage of canaries every night with her petticoat, went to bed early, and saved her sous. They were a race by themselves, and Bara knew them all, since he was, as I say, the first to whom they came with their troubles and their joys, more often their troubles, for their joys were rare and of short duration.

"Did you see the new hat of Yvette? No, you did not, I am sure. It cost eighty-nine cents in American

money, all done, and Yvette was as pretty as a cherry in it."

Raymond had finally got the patent-leather shoes with the gray cloth tops. That spring she intended to save and buy the light gray tailor-made. Her whole heart and mind were set upon it. There would be days when she would eat like a sparrow to get that dress. It was lined with silk. There was no dress like it in the world.

And yet they were not all practical or economical. Was it a rich Brazilian planter, or a kind-hearted Bolivian (I forget which) who, seeing Lucie and Marthe sharing a bock in the café on the Place Blanche, handed them each two hundred francs? Lucie rushed off immediately and bought a muff—the muff of a grande dame. Marthe purchased a suite of yellow satin furniture for her garret room. The next day they had not a sou left of the four hundred francs, and a week later sold their great good fortune to a second-hand dealer at a sacrifice.

Ah, yes, Bara knew them all!

Barely ten minutes had elapsed after Babette and Raveau had left than there came a timid rap at Bara's door, and he crossed his small studio to open it to a girl the pockets of whose ulster were torn. A straw toque, with a drooping feather, covered her dark hair, half shading her pale face, from which two large brown eyes gleamed with that light in them of the discouraged and the weary.

"I do not derange you?" she ventured on entering.

"Not at all, my child, come in. What is new with you?"

"Nothing," she said, bravely shrugging her slim shoulders. "I am hungry! Mon Dieu! but I am hungry. I have not eaten since yesterday noon."

Bara kissed her on both cheeks. "Ah! my poor kid! Very well! we shall arrange that, my little Aline. Voilà, here is a franc and a half! Go and feed."

"Thank you," she said, and dropped the silver into one of the worn pockets of her ulster. "You knew well that I would not ask you, but I am hungry. If it continues thus I shall go to the Seine."

"Nonsense!" he laughed. "Go and eat. Have you been to Ferrière? He needs a model. I saw him last night at the ball. Or to Vinet? Eh? Wait! I'll give you a line to him. He pays five francs the séance," and he scribbled Vinet's address and three others on an envelope.

"Thank you," she said. "You are a good 'type,' " and moved toward the door, a new light in her eyes, more courage in her heart, and the franc and a half safe in her hand.

"Come back to me after you have eaten if you do not find Vinet," said he.

"Thank you, my old one."

She was smiling now.

"Merci!" she breathed in gratefulness, and touched her lips to his cheek.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

RAVEAU'S neighbourly acquaintance with Bara, an acquaintanceship which rapidly ripened into friendship, was of value. He knew Babette was safe during his absent hours with Bara within call. Moreover, his friendship with the sculptor enabled him to meet his artist friends and mingle as freely as he chose in the life of Montmartre. In adapting himself to Bara and his friends he became one of them, for he began again to paint, and a painter is seldom, if ever, questioned or troubled by the police. Thus he could conceal his identity, avoid suspicion, and live peacefully among that vast law-abiding brotherhood of artists who do no harm to any one.

It was not until a week after Babette had posed for him—Bara being discreet like all real Bohemians—that the master knocked at their door, and he put on his best coat, too, for the occasion.

"Listen, my children!" he confided with a grin on entering. "To-night I have been invited to Talbard's. Ah! mon Dieu! What a type! He will amuse you, my friend," he laughed, with a wink to Raveau. "He gives soirées. Ha! Ha! Soirées like the grande monde. He is completely crazy!

Ah, you must not miss it! We shall go, you and I, eh?" He paused and turned to Babette. "But not you, Madame—no—Talbard's soirées are not for you, my child," and seeing her sudden look of disappointment added: "Your husband will explain to you to-morrow. But you must see it—you must know Talbard. He is thirty years old and lives in the rue Lepic on an income of exactly three thousand six hundred and eighty-two francs a year. He's got it all down in a book—so much for his food, his soirées, his rent, his gas, and his pleasure, especially his pleasure. It is his goal in life to pose as a leader of society, so he presses his trousers, calculates to a sou his weekly expenditures, parts his hair in the middle, is punctilious in his dress and manners, and gathers about him all the society he can get hold of on Thursday nights weekly. But, come along, you shall see for yourself. I shall rap at your door about nine."

"It's agreed," said Raveau. And still grinning over the prospective evening, the master took his leave.

So steep were the dark stairs leading up to Talbard's small apartment beneath the roof that they were difficult to ascend and positively dangerous to descend—a winding corkscrew of a stairway uncarpeted and slippery as ice—and up these stairs a little after nine that evening climbed Bara and Raveau followed by a dozen models, as many painters, and three matronly old ladies who had once been both

beautiful and young and who regarded the younger generation behind their mended fans critically, especially the girls who at Talbard's parties were always on their best behaviour. Anything approaching an orgy Talbard quickly suppressed. The small hallway, the salon, the dining-room, and the bedroom of the leader of fashion were well filled with a collection of old-fashioned pictures and furniture dating from the early sixties, and all of which Talbard had inherited from an aunt, who, it is said, once lived in state in the conservative Faubourg St. Germain. Sometimes it was Marguerite whom Talbard chose to receive his guests. To-night it was Francine. She had washed and neatly ironed her waist, and the waist, which was white, had to be turned down modestly at the throat. Talbard was very strict about this, and the old ladies, sitting behind their mended fans, were even more so. "What are the young girls of France coming to?" they exclaimed to Raveau.

Nothing could have been more strange than these soirées of Talbard's. A farce comedy of respectability, a sort of formal weekly atonement for past errors.

And when the recitations were finished, the papers—folded and written with unknown questions and answers—were over, when Mademoiselle Francine, who once sang twice at a café concert, had finished her grand aria, it got to be a little more amusing. They turned off the gas-metre and every one was for

a few moments left in darkness. Talbard was furious. He said to several of the painters:

"My evening is ruined! There are no well-bred people left in France." At which the painters and the rest smiled discreetly, a few having not yet dined, and chocolate was to be served as usual at eleven o'clock, thick chocolate and a few crackers.

And it was served. Francine saw to this.

Slowly they filed into the small dining-room, arm in arm. Nothing could have been more formal, and no function, even at the Elysée, could have been more conservative.

At a quarter to twelve a late omnibus took away the remaining guests, all save Francine.

"Permit me, Mademoiselle, to see you home," Raveau had said gallantly to her out of the goodness of his heart.

"You are very kind, Monsieur," she smiled. "I do not live far—the rue Fontaine," flattered by his attention which she wholly misunderstood, so Raveau explained to Bara; and Francine, the great singer, wrapped up her blond head and throat with a filmy shawl, passed her powder puff over her nose, added an extra dab of rouge to her lips, bid good-night to Talbard, and descended the stairs, with Raveau following her high heels.

As they crossed the Place Pigalle and neared the terrace of a big café, the girl withdrew her arm and gave a searching, frightened glance over the crowded terrace as they moved on beyond the glare of the lights.

"Evidently there is some one there you know," said Raveau to the girl.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Some one waiting for you," he ventured.

She smiled at him knowingly, and nervously pressed his hand.

"You should have told me," said he. "I understand."

"There is no danger," she said half audibly as they drew past the end of the terrace where sat the gentleman in question—a fellow in a steamer cap edging his neatly clipped hair, a voyou, an apache of the first order in a gray suit, a white silk scarf serving him as collar and cravat, his small, vicious eyes following them as they passed, crossed the Place Pigalle, and disappeared down the rue Fontaine, and here Raveau left her at her door in a side street off the rue Fontaine. And she lived there, this girl, in a bedroom and a box of a kitchen at the bottom of a court dark even when the sun shone. A square well of a court, grimy with age and dust and soot, and out of the window opposite, her neighbour, a girl who danced nightly at Tabarin's, had the habit of cleaning a rabbit, like a pigmy flayed alive. Since this window was close to the water spigot in the court, the court itself had been a catch-trap for the filth that for years had fallen into it. The bigger drain-pipes, descending like dead serpents from the roof, were incrustated with dust, until the old court had become thick and seemingly crystallized in grime,

evidently the result of years of hurried cleanings out of the various windows, which were not all of the same size. Two or three spears of grass, however, still grew between the flags close to the water spigot, a sort of oasis in a pit.

There was no sunshine in this house whatsoever. It was all gloom and hard times, and l'amour, and jealousy, and disputes—cocaine, ether, lies, and tears.

It was a sort of furnished barrack, in which Folly lurked in her dinginess—squalid and grimed with the dust and soot of years; in which Poverty was a daily acquaintance and Remorse a constant guest, and the concierge slept well, since her tenants rarely disturbed her to enter until daylight, and left in the afternoon at the hour of the apéritif, though some in their bedroom slippers and a wrapper slipped out before noon for a bottle of milk or ten sous' worth of cocaine in a pill box, and from all the way up the dingy stairs the place smelt of rouge, cheap perfume, and bad cooking.

Nothing is more characteristic of the life and atmosphere of a house than its doors. They seem, as it were, to have a personality suggesting as well those of the people living behind them. The doors in this house were varied in the aspect they presented to the visitor. Some were clean, others were scarred and dirty. Some closed badly, leaving slits for the wind. Evidently the tenants whose domicile they screened cared little if they were open or shut. Others had been repaired and possessed a strong steel lock and

bolt. There must have been a good reason for this—probably an evil one. The more evil the place, the stronger are its barriers. Again, some of these doors had served as “go betweens,” had been slammed and battered, kicked and pounded upon through scenes of jealousy and rage, or been tapped upon cautiously by the repentant and the discreet.

The whole place had a miserable aspect. This barrack of misery, Raveau knew, was only one of many. The cheap hotels in Montmartre were luxurious in comparison—modern comfort, heat, and electric light, and rooms by the hour, the day, the week, or the month, with clean lace curtains at the windows, and the brass sign at the entrance announcing the luxuries within. Far different from the house on the corner, where the blinds were always closed and the door always open.

Who was this fellow that Francine had nervously avoided as they passed?

Hardly had Raveau turned the corner of the side street and entered the rue Fontaine than he came face to face with him. He lifted a shifty eye to Raveau as he passed him, but he passed in sullen silence, firmly convinced that Raveau was a member of the police and that Francine was then at the police station. Many had been arrested during the week and he had warned her to be careful—warned her as he always did—threatening her life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

TIME passed, and early spring arrived—those balmy, indolent days when one welcomes the first green leaves trying to shade the pavements; days when Babette cared for her plants under the skylight, and did the housework in the small nest over Bara's while Raveau worked at his easel.

It must be remembered that he was clever in his imitation of a small canvas, mere studies—attributed to Corot—and often sold as authentic by a certain dealer near the grands boulevards, and whom he had known for years.

At five louis a piece, the business to Raveau was profitable, more so, you may be sure, to the dealer, for there are few who buy pictures who know anything about them or their value.

As for Babette, she never grew tired of watching him paint.

"Are you not wonderful!" she used to sigh over his shoulder. "Did I not tell you you would succeed? For they are not content with one of yours since you must make the same over and over again for them. It is the great success that," she used to declare proudly; "other painters are never asked

but for one, and then they must make a different one. Is it not so, my dearest? Monsieur Bara has explained it all to me."

But there were days when she spent long hours now in the little studio above Bara's alone—hours when she used to talk to the cat, who crept up to her from the courtyard, and sometimes she would go down and rap at Bara's door for company, for Raveau often started out to his picture dealer in the morning, and did not return until her dinner was on the stove—a gas range in their small cabinet de toilette.

The portrait that Bara made of Babette was so strikingly like her that she begged for a replica in plaster of it to send to her father, and Bara made it for her, retouched it, and helped her to pack it up safely; he even carried the small case himself all the way over to the Quai d'Orsay, and saw that it went to La Fourche by "petite vitesse."

It did not take long to deliver a "Corot" to one Baumsiedle. What was Raveau doing in the meantime? Babette was content that every hour he spent away from her was necessary to their mutual welfare. Bara, being an old Bohemian, discreet to his fingertips, was the last man in the world to question the private life or daily whereabouts of another.

A week later, one afternoon when the cat was licking herself clean, undisturbed outside the "loge" of the concierge, and the dramatic school was in the middle of a rehearsal, a gentleman in a silk hat—rather a heavy gentleman in a frock coat, who looked

as if he had just left a tea—opened the door of the concierge and said, “Monsieur Raveau?”

The concierge, who was half awake in her chair, opened her eyes and replied sleepily: “The stairs to the right, Monsieur—the door on the second landing; and if he is not in rap at Monsieur Bara’s door on the floor below. He is often there.”

“Thank you, Madame,” returned the visitor, lifting his hat, and went on through the cobbled courtyard and up the narrow stairs.

Raveau was out, but a moment later Babette, who had been to the shop to purchase a cheese, found the strange gentleman knocking at her door as she ascended the stairs. As she reached the landing the gentleman bowed, and lifted his hat to her.

“Monsieur Raveau is not in?” he ventured.

“My husband is out. I expect him back at seven,” said Babette.

“It is about a little affair of a picture I wish to buy. Do not disturb yourself, Madame, I pray you.” He bowed again, and assuring her he would return at seven, said “pardon” twice, passed her, and went down the stairs.

It was Guinard, Chief Inspector of Police.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

BABETTE was sewing when Raveau sprang softly up the stairs and thrust his key in the lock.

"I have a surprise for you!" she exclaimed, running to him as he entered.

He looked at her inquisitively.

"Listen, my dearest!" she continued breathlessly. "Did I not tell you you are already famous?"

"What has happened?" he asked, taking her young face between his hands.

She raised herself on tiptoe, careful that her needle did not prick him. "It is a secret," she whispered in his ear. "A rich gentleman has called to buy one of your pictures."

"Um!" exclaimed Raveau.

"He is to return at seven," confided Babette.

Raveau drew her beneath the window and glanced at his watch. It lacked then five minutes to seven. Scarcely had he returned it to his pocket than a slow step on the stairs and two raps at the door made them turn. Babette ran softly to it and opened it wide.

"Ah! it is you, Monsieur!" she exclaimed, proudly, with a welcoming smile. "As you see, my husband

is at home. Pierre, this is the gentleman who called this afternoon."

Very quietly, lifting his hat first to Babette, and with a low bow to Raveau, Guinard crossed their threshold.

Even Babette, who watched her husband as he advanced toward the visitor, did not detect a vestige of the surprise and shock that swept through him.

"Good-evening, Monsieur," said Raveau evenly, and bowed.

"A thousand pardons," apologized Guinard, slowly peeling off his yellow gloves.

He seemed embarrassed.

"I fear I have been indiscreet enough to have called at an awkward hour, but as I leave Paris early in the morning, and it concerns one of your pictures, I—I—I thought it best to come to you, personally, late as it is."

"Be seated, I pray you," insisted Raveau, offering Guinard a chair, which the latter politely refused; then suddenly turning to Babette, Raveau said quietly:

"Go down to Bara's, my dearest; this gentleman and I have some business to talk over. I shall call you when we have finished."

"Do not let me derange you, Madame," interposed Guinard, as he turned and again bowed to Babette.

"Affairs are always boring to women," laughed Raveau with an effort. "There, my little one, run

along for a moment. It is possible, Monsieur, you might like a cup of tea?"

"Never, my good Monsieur," exclaimed Guinard, raising both his ungloved hands high in protest, a gesture which accented his tall, big frame. "Never, Monsieur," he smiled. "You will excuse me from the cup of tea, which I am sure madame serves charmingly, but it keeps me awake. I should not sleep for a week. When one reaches my age one must deprive one's self of the good things of life. Ah! it is not easy."

Babette's hand touched the door knob.

"Au revoir, Monsieur," she smiled back at him.

"Au revoir, Madame," returned Guinard, as she closed the door behind her, and tripped rapidly down the steps to Bara's studio.

Raveau heard the door below open and close.

They were alone.

For the space of some moments neither man facing each other spoke, each waiting for the other to begin. Finally it was Raveau who broke the strain of that silence, since the guilty are generally the first to speak.

"Guinard," he began, looking straight into the shrewd eyes of his old enemy, "why couldn't you have left me alone? I have not troubled you people in a long time, and you know it. Neither you nor the public."

Guinard slightly inclined his head.

"Go on," said he coldly.

"What do you want?" exclaimed Raveau.

"You," declared Guinard quietly.

Raveau drew a quick, deep breath, raised his hands hopelessly, and let them fall in his pockets.

"You," repeated Guinard. "It must be evident to you that I have not come here to say 'bon jour' to you."

"What, then?" inquired the other doggedly, every nerve in him tense as wire.

"For an old affair," continued the detective; "the counterfeiter Martin, alias 'Brooks,' an old friend of yours, since we have evidence you worked with him and the woman Lefèvre, in Brussels."

"That affair was settled by the Cours d'Assises four years ago," declared Raveau, his voice rising despite his beating heart. "I, personally, was cleared of any guilt in the matter—cleared for all time, if we are to go by the verdict of a Supreme Court."

"Men like you, Raveau," returned Guinard slowly, "are never wholly cleared." Then, to Raveau's astonishment, he continued, in a voice that reverberated mercilessly through the small room: "You must confess that since your marriage at La Fourche to Mademoiselle Babette Pivot we have allowed you at least your honeymoon. I compliment you on finding so charming a person. I regret I cannot compliment madame in the same light. Evidently she knew nothing of you when she married you."

"Nothing," declared Raveau with a shrug. "See here, Monsieur Guinard, you have known me to speak the truth before. When I tell you now that,

since the hour I met my wife I have tried to live honestly; that I have succeeded"—his voice had grown steadier and clearer, though terror lurked within him, a dull, sickening terror, as he gazed at the man before him—"have completely renounced my—my old life."

"Take your hands out of your pockets!" commanded Guinard brusquely.

Raveau drew them forth, and, with a bitter smile, turned both empty pockets inside out.

"I have never been an assassin, Monsieur Guinard," he declared. "Had I wanted to kill you, I could have arranged it long ago."

"It would have cost you your head," returned the other.

"I am not such a fool," declared Raveau.

Then after a brief pause:

"Has it occurred to you that since you entered my door, you have been slowly killing me? If it means my arrest——"

He took a step toward the table, turned to control himself, and again confronted the detective. "You are married, Monsieur," he resumed, "to a woman you love as I love my wife. You have two grown sons and a daughter, you have the respect of the community, fortune, an enviable reputation; you are free—a free man. These things are precious things in life. Put yourself in my place—when a man loves as I love that child downstairs, when he tries his best to live honestly as I have done, when he has renounced

the past, when at last he begins to feel safe ground under him, and troubles no one, when his whole heart and soul is wrapped up in one being."

"You forget," interposed Guinard, "that affairs of the heart have nothing to do with our duty. When I tell you I want you, I mean what I say."

"Guinard!" cried Raveau, his voice rising in sudden fear and desperation. "Monsieur Guinard, I beg of you"—he drew his hand across his forehead, like a man who had been struck and dazed. Then he resumed hoarsely—"let me go! I'll help you! It is not the first time one of our profession has helped you people. Ask of me what you wish, but for her sake let me go!"

He sank back against the table, his hands gripping its edge, his chest heaving—haggard—staring at the man who held him in his power with the eyes of a man who was going insane.

"She's all I've got!" he mumbled thickly.

Inspector Guinard laid down his yellow gloves on a chair, placed his hat and stick next to them, drove both his hands into his trousers pockets, took a step toward the skylight, rubbed his determined jaw for some moments in silence, and then, suddenly turning to the man still gripping the table's edge, said:

"You will report at police headquarters at ten o'clock to-morrow morning."

"Then it means my arrest!"

He saw the man before him bury his gray head in his hands.

"Babette," he murmured, "Babette!" But the words were inaudible to the detective.

"To be frank with you, Raveau," the latter resumed, "I did not come here to-day to arrest you."

Raveau raised his head with a start.

"It—it is true, what you say, Inspector Guinard?"

A strange light came into his eyes. He threw out his arms as if to clutch the shoulders of Guinard in a sort of bewildered gratitude.

"It is true we want you," returned the detective quickly; "precisely why we want you, I am not at liberty to tell you to-night. You will learn that to-morrow. You have already convinced me of much to-day—much that I wanted to know. And since I am detaining madame from dining with you, have the goodness to summon your wife."


Like a man in a dream, Raveau moved toward the closed door; when he reached it he stopped, and with an effort, forcing himself into something of his old-time calmness, though his hands were trembling, he opened it and called down the stairs:

"Babette! Babette!"

"Yes, my dearest."

"You—you may come up now; monsieur is going."

"Adorable!" declared Guinard, picking up one of Raveau's sketches as Babette recrossed her threshold. "But to be frank, Monsieur, I like the one in the rue Lafitte the best. Ah! that little landscape of yours! It has captivated me—it has quite won my heart."



Then we shall meet at ten to-morrow, my good Monsieur?"

"It is an affair understood," replied Raveau evenly.

"Madame," continued Guinard—he turned to Babette, and bending graciously, lifted the tips of her fingers to his lips—"a thousand pardons for having exiled you so long from your charming and talented husband." He picked up his stick and hat. "Au revoir, Monsieur! Bon soir, Madame."

"Your gloves, Monsieur!" cried Babette, running out to the landing with them.

Inspector Guinard turned back at the sound of her voice.

"A thousand thanks, dear Madame! I am always absent-minded when engrossed in the things I love." She laid the gloves in the open palm of his big hand. Again he lifted his hat, turned, and was gone.

Terror, in the shape of this man Guinard, had crossed their threshold, had entered their peaceful nest beneath the skylight, had stayed like a spectre through those long moments of fear and agony of mind to Raveau, and had finally disappeared with the grace of a Chesterfield, leaving in its trail doubt, fear, and anxiety.

That which he had feared most—arrest—had not occurred. He felt like a man who had escaped death by a miracle. What did Guinard want him for? Further evidence in the Martin case? Impossible! The case was long ago dead, and Martin serving a long sentence at Fresnes. To aid the police in some

other affair? One thing certain, he must present himself at headquarters in the morning. How long would they detain him? How could he disguise this unforeseen state of affairs from Babette? All these conjectures worried him. How, too, had Guinard known the details of his wedding? Evidently the secret police had been closely in touch with his movements, and yet he was still certain that in the affair of the collector he had little to fear.

There had been, too, a sudden change in Guinard's manner—a man whom he had always feared, and who was known to be merciless in the performance of his duty. It is quite possible that something had occurred to soften the heart of this old veteran of the police.

The truth was he believed in Raveau. He had struck terror into that peaceful home where true love ruled. He had been merciless with many a criminal. Never had he in all his long experience, however, met one so dear as Babette. She had captured him by her personality, her gentleness, her beauty, and her honesty. To have arrested Raveau he knew would have practically killed her.

"Poor child," he said to himself as he went downstairs. "But what a change in Raveau. The chief will see that I am not wrong in my theory. We will thrash that question out to-morrow."

It was nearly dark when Raveau and Babette sat down to dinner. The swallows had ceased screaming as they circled over the roofs. They dined under

the glow of their lamp, Babette plying him with questions about the result of the business talk.

"He is charming, that gentleman," she declared, as she poured Raveau's coffee.

"Sapristi!" returned Raveau, "I forgot to ask him for his card. Guillemet, I believe he said his name was."

"A gentleman of leisure," intervened Babette; "one can see that."

"At all events," continued Raveau, "his name doesn't matter; I believe him to be a man of his word. He has given me a rendezvous at ten to-morrow, and I may not be back for luncheon, my dearest."

All that night she lay asleep on his arm. Raveau did not close his eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

INSPECTOR GUINARD'S steps had not, however, led him directly to the street.

He had interviewed Raveau in the light of an experiment; had tested him in the fire for traces of a base product, and found gold in the form of truth and sincerity. Moreover, he had discovered Babette. What he had expected to find was a type of woman no one knew better than he in his long experience among criminals; he had found an angel. Had Guinard a heart? Something at least, in the modest home he had just left, had touched it. Though he half told himself it was unnecessary, nevertheless, more from the habit of method than doubt, he had listened until he had heard Raveau's door close, and had rapped at Bara's with a view to obtaining from him more concerning his intimate neighbours.

He found the master in his working blouse, making a plaster-of-Paris cast of a small bust, an operation that forced him to hastily make his excuses to his unknown visitor, and bid him be seated, while he poured the fast-hardening solution into the matrix, carefully scraped away the exuding plaster from the joint of the two halves, and held the mould firmly while it set, his visitor, who had chosen the piano

stool, watching him in silence with the keenest interest.

From the moment Guinard had entered Bara's door nothing had escaped him, neither the atmosphere of the small studio nor the personality of the man before him, whose work all Paris was familiar with. Long experience in observation had developed in Guinard a sixth sense: that which he saw his mind photographed in detail, his memory providing a vast storeroom for these mental negatives taken with an unerring psychology and precision.

"Monsieur, a thousand pardons!" apologized Bara, setting aside the mould, and hurriedly washing the plaster from his hands in a bucket of water. "But it was quite impossible to stop."

"Naturally," laughed Guinard. "Pardon my intrusion at so busy a moment. I have come to ask you a favour. The Société de Bienfaisance of the eighth arrondissement, as you know, have done much toward helping women who are ill and out of work."

Bara brightened as he dried his hands on his blouse. "Good!" he exclaimed; "and you want me to help?"

"Would you consider us abusing your good-will," ventured Guinard, "if we were to ask you for—say, a few of your bronzes to grace the small exhibition our charity is giving in September? You see, I have come to you early. I know how much your work is sought after."

"You have only to ask me," returned Bara, opening his arms wide in his sudden enthusiasm, "since

it is for the little women who are ill. I know your charity, Monsieur—it is an excellent one. There cannot be too many of them. As for my bronzes, take them all if you like, Monsieur—er——”

“Guillemet,” declared Guinard.

“Very well, Monsieur Guillemet, the little affair is simple enough. Any or all of them if you wish. Do you know the charities I do not lend my things to? I’ll tell you,” and he went on vibrantly with his usual tirade against the attitude of the public toward art—against the futurists, the cubists, and certain loan exhibitions managed by the haute monde where poverty crept to the back door to receive a pittance while fashion conspicuously left by the front, glad to have seen and been seen.

As he finished, he turned to his modelling stand, seized the casting, and began to carefully open the mould.

“Ah! Why, it is Madame Raveau!” exclaimed Guinard, as Bara divided the matrix revealing Babette’s pretty head and shoulders.

“Ah! So you know that charming little neighbour of mine?” smiled the master.

“Mon Dieu! Monsieur, I have just left there,” confessed the inspector, and he nodded to the ceiling.

“Then it was you who passed my door a little before seven?”

“Precisely. I went to see Monsieur Raveau, à propos of a little picture, not for charity—for myself. What an adorable little head,” he added, rising and

bending over the cast; "and what a likeness! All my compliments, Monsieur; all——"

"You like it?" Bara grinned. "Ah! indeed she is adorable—adorable in every way, that child. One is lucky to have such neighbours, they make up for all the bad ones of one's life. You know him, then? They are as happy as two birds in a nest. He is the best fellow in the world: simple, intelligent, sincere, honest—a fellow you can rely on; and do you know," he continued, lapsing into a serious tone, "I predict for him an excellent career as a painter; a little timid yet in his art, but you shall see—it will be as I tell you, he has that great quality, sincerity, and the ability to see true colour and the beautiful—ah! the sacré cubists. If you have bought one of his pictures I congratulate you—you will not regret it, mark my word. Bah! so many paint without intelligence. Good art means a high intelligence, and that Pierre Raveau has. Show me a man's work and I can tell you the strength and nature of the man himself. In literature, in music, in science and art, it is the same," he continued with a gesture of conviction. "A man produces to the limit of his mentality, never a stroke beyond, and though his imagination may long to carry him past this limit, he is helpless to proceed. I have never known a single exception. Take for example——"

"Pardon," interrupted Guinard, glancing at his watch, "I must be going. Again let me thank you for your generous offer."

"It is nothing," returned the master. "For the little women who are ill—everything."

Guinard paused at the door. "Would it be possible," he ventured, "to add the little bust so ravishing of Madame Raveau?"

"Mon Dieu! Monsieur," hesitated Bara. "No—frankly no—my good little neighbour is not for the public—a sentiment, Monsieur, but you understand?"

"Perfectly," returned the inspector, opening the door. "Then I can count on you in September?"

"You have but to drop me a line," said Bara with a genial wave of his hand.

"I shall not forget," said Guinard, as he turned down the stairs.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

AT NINE the next morning Raveau received a yellow envelope by hand. There was nothing to suggest where this yellow envelope came from. It was precisely similar to the yellow envelope provided for the public "cafés." This enclosure, the contents of which he kept from Babette, was, however, definite enough. Its printed heading—"City of Paris: Commissariat of Police," and the formal note below:

You are requested to present yourself before the Commissaire in the rue Vibert at ten this morning instead of Police Headquarters, as was explained to you yesterday,

and signed "The Commissaire"—left no doubt as to its origin.

When shortly before ten Raveau entered that door, which opens and closes upon the free and the guilty, he found himself in a plain room painted a dull gray, and provided with an empty stove, a long desk behind a counter, and four wooden benches.

Two men were seated back of the counter writing.

One of these men looked up at Raveau as he entered and raised his eyes questioningly as to what he wanted.

"I have a rendezvous with Monsieur le Commissaire at ten," said Raveau.

The man nodded, pulled at his long reddish moustache, said brusquely, "Sit down!" and bent his head over his work again.

He did not say:

"Have the amiability to be seated, Monsieur," as in other public places in France. The language and manners in police stations are different—quick, and to the point, and totally bereft of sympathy or effusiveness. At the extreme end of the bench was a woman nursing a baby; slightly removed from her sat a haggard young man, whose gaunt hand covering his threadbare knees trembled visibly. No sound woke the stillness of that room, save the clock ticking on the wall, the scratch of the two pens of the clerks, and occasionally the crying baby at the bared breast of the woman.

The clerk who had spoken ceased writing to roll a cigarette, and to borrow a match from his fellow-clerk. The young man with the threadbare knees nervously coughed twice. He had been accused of stealing a gold chain-purse from a lady in the "metro." Suddenly the front door opened and two policemen entered, pushing before them a fellow protesting vehemently his innocence. They stopped with their charge before the clerk, explained briefly the case—that the man had stabbed his mistress—and continuing past the bench with their prisoner, opened the door leading to the cells. Raveau caught a clear view of him

as he passed. It was Francine's "gigolo," the apache who had followed him to her door.

The pens continued to scratch, the pickpocket to cough, and the baby to cry.

A door next to the empty stove, which smelt of soot, opened briskly, the clerk raised his head, and nodded to Raveau to enter.

Raveau rose, and, turning, saw before him in the open doorway the secretary of the Commissaire. This important official resembled somewhat the trusted paying teller of a bank.

Having indicated, with a quick gesture of the hand, his private office, a step from where he stood, and of which the door was wide open, he said, "Enter!" and added as he took his seat behind his desk, "You may sit down."

For a long moment Raveau watched him while he put together the papers relative to another affair, pinning them carefully together, and laying them neatly in a brass wire basket next to a revolver several extra cartridges for which lay among the papers in the basket. This revolver looked as if it had not been used in years. It was a short blue revolver of the type known as "Bulldog," its barrel showing traces of rust. Having been used or not, it was nevertheless there, its muzzle as it lay on its side pointing to the man who was being questioned, its handle within easy reach of the secretary's hand, and it lay there as innocently as the secretary's pen, a sort of silent watchdog over the visitor, whoever

he might happen to be—and there were many daily: some innocent with justifiable complaints, some deep in sin, some wrenched in from the street by force.

Raveau gazed about him. There were three windows glazed in corrugated glass giving on the street, and the room was painted a light bird's-egg blue. There were also two closed doors back of the secretary's chair. The secretary now opened a drawer, took out a ledger, ran his eyes down a page in the middle of it, referred to a smaller ledger, twirled his small black moustache, locked his fingers, and said, looking up at his visitor:

"Your name is Raveau, alias Ravin, alias Ransom. You were born in Paris. You have been twice convicted of forgery—prison of the santé—Prison of Fresnes; married at La Fourche in Tourraine to Marie Babette Pivot, only daughter of Emile Pivot, guardian of the prison at La Fourche."

Raveau nodded. The secretary closed the book, drew forth a packet of letters from a drawer, extracted one, read it carefully, returned it to its drawer, and pushed an electric button next to the wire basket. The door which Raveau had entered was opened promptly by the clerk's hand, the one who had rolled the cigarette.

"Tell Monsieur le Commissaire to have the amiability to enter—affair Ravin," said the secretary.

"It is well, Monsieur," replied the clerk, withdrawing and closing the door. The secretary returned to the papers on his desk. Near the revolver

stood a small frame containing the portrait of his wife and baby next to a bunch of cowslips in a glass, picked perhaps by the baby. Evidently the secretary lived in the country.

Again a door opened—brusquely this time—the door on the left of the desk, and a thin, elderly man, nearly bald, wearing a gray moustache and imperial, and who bore a strange resemblance to Louis Napoléon, entered, halted, and ran his keen black eyes over Raveau as both he and the secretary rose simultaneously from their chairs. It was Monsieur le Commissaire.

The secretary murmured a few words to him, the Commissaire nodded, and the secretary left the room.

“Be seated,” said the Commissaire. Raveau again sat down, the Commissaire taking the vacated chair back of the desk. Then he leaned forward and said: “Monsieur, the chief Inspector Guinard called on you last night.”

“Yes, Monsieur le Commissaire,” returned Raveau.

“I have considerable to say to you, Raveau,” the Commissaire continued, in a tone in which there was a touch of senile satisfaction and sarcasm.

“You see, we are never far from you people; you all come to us in the end. You remind us of a flock of straggling sheep—there are always bad ones in the flock. They are, nevertheless,” he declared, rubbing the palms of his senile hands together, “as easy for us to bring to our net as the innocent—when we want them.”

The face of this man was both kindly and shrewd, and his expression at all times a complex problem. He was continually on the alert, and his voice, though weak, had a certain precision and persistence in its intonation. All told, he was proud of the long years during which he had risen among the police, done his duty, and finally gained the appointment of Commissaire.

"The reason we have sent for you," he continued, "concerns a matter which you are a stranger to—a theory of my own."

Raveau experienced a feeling of sudden and intense relief, so much so that, under the emotion of the moment, the colour flushed to his cheeks and paled as rapidly.

"A theory," he repeated coldly.

He looked up sharply at Raveau with a shrewd glance in his aged eyes that sent a cold sweat to Raveau's forehead.

"Guinard has lied to me," Raveau told himself, searching nervously for his handkerchief, though he checked himself before wiping his brow.

"I should like to explain to you, Monsieur le Commissaire," ventured Raveau. "I beg of you that you will listen to me."

"You will wait for—for your petty explanations, until I have finished," commanded the Commissaire testily. "Your life has been an abomination, Raveau!"

Guinard had played him false—he was certain of it

now, and terrified at the thought. Instead of arresting him before his wife, that skilful member of the Sureté had brought him here, to a room from which the guilty never escape; brought him with all the skill and politeness of which Guinard was capable. There had been no fight, no attempt to escape, no struggle in the studio. He was where he was nevertheless, seated before a man who by simply touching the button between the portrait of the secretary's wife and child and the loaded revolver could have put him in a cell below, refused him permission to see Babette, and transferred him to prison to await his trial. The Commissaire again regarded him closely before speaking.

"Forgive me, Monsieur," said Raveau. "You have commanded me not to speak, but——"

"Go on!" said the Commissaire. "What have you to say for yourself?"

"Monsieur le Commissaire," resumed Raveau with an effort, "I have done my best. I love my wife! She is the only woman—the only thing in life I do love; the only woman I have ever loved. It is she who has changed my life. I appeal to your humanity as a man, Monsieur. I am trying to become an honourable man, to put back of me the dregs of a life which once attracted me, but which attracts me no more. I have never killed. I have lied and profited by lying; it was my trade, a hopeless trade, when you consider all I have suffered, risked, and passed through, hounded as a thief, never sure of a day's real

freedom. The nerves break down after a while—the heart gets sick. We are a pack of fools, we criminals who dare the law. You have left me to shift for myself, a free criminal, but do you know what the life of a free criminal is when you love? I give you my word of honour, Monsieur, and my word is good, that I shall be at your disposition whenever you want me, that I shall not deceive you. All I beg and implore of you is that you will not arrest me; that you will give me a chance to become an honourable man.”

Raveau ceased speaking.

The Commissaire, who had been listening with one elbow on the desk, and two thin fingers tapping his temple, cleared his throat and repeated:

“The reason we have sent for you concerns a matter which you are a stranger to—a theory of our own.”

Raveau experienced again a feeling of sudden and intense relief, so much so that under the emotion of the moment the colour again flushed to his cheeks and paled as rapidly.

“A theory in which the Chief of Police and myself are in perfect accord.”

Then in an even measured voice:

“You have been for years one of the most skilful criminals in the profession. Your record has been long and varied. The one thing you fear to-day is arrest. Since your marriage in Tourraine you have done your best, as far as our knowledge goes, to live honestly. You are a man of refinement and rare education. I repeat that your life has been an

abomination. You are trying to reform. Very well, Raveau, I intend to give you a chance. My theory has been for a long time—and it is an old adage—‘Set a thief to catch a thief.’ There is a case in question—a case of importance both to the English authorities and our own. The two men implicated in it are known to you. Bradley—alias ‘Radcliffe,’ alias ‘Clifford’—who in October last killed the night guardian of a bank.”

Raveau started to speak.

“You will permit me to finish,” said the Commissaire, raising his hand.

“The reason I sent Inspector Guinard to you must be clear to you. The report Monsieur Guinard has given us concerning you, the indisputable honesty of your wife, and the esteem in which your neighbour, Monsieur Bara, holds you both, is sufficient guarantee to myself and my colleagues of your good faith. You have married a good woman—a woman whom you love, a woman whose life and welfare lie in your hands, and you have so far kept her in ignorance of your abominable career. You have never lacked courage, Raveau. There is a reward of twenty-five thousand francs for Bradley’s arrest. The man who worked with him also robbed a bank—the French Bank has also offered twenty-five thousand francs reward—Podonoff, alias ‘Vremer.’ Both these men are known to you.”

“It is exact, Monsieur le Commissaire,” intervened Raveau with bated breath.

"The first was in Fresnes with you when you served your second sentence for forgery. The latter, an old counterfeiter, we have learned, who tried to associate himself with you in a case of blackmail in Brussels, in '93."

"The man was a murderer!" declared Raveau. "I declined to deal with him. I have never been an assassin, Monsieur le Commissaire."

"That we know," resumed the other. "I repeat, you are not here to be arrested, but to enter our employ, upon a salary corresponding to that allowed our other men of the service on similar duty."

Raveau sprang to his feet with the gesture of a man no longer able to sit still. A strange joy surged through him. The elder man, watching him, saw him pace rapidly twice before his desk, too overcome for the moment to open his lips.

Suddenly he stopped and stretched out his hands. He tried to speak, but the tears streamed down his cheeks and a sharp pain gripped him in the throat. The room seemed to reel before him. Dimly he saw the aged man rise in his chair, push the electric button, approach him, and place his hand firmly on his shoulder.

"There, Raveau!" said he. "You have nothing to fear from this day forth."

The door opened and the clerk entered; the thin, whining cry of a baby reached his ears; it was the mother and child being dismissed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

FREE! Free to live honestly!
“I am free!” he kept repeating mechanically to himself, as he walked back from the Commissariat in the rue Vibert.

He strode on rapidly, giddy from the sheer, miraculous truth, and his eyes, which scarcely noticed the pavement or the passerby, had assumed a peculiar brilliancy that might justly have been due to a drug.

Any one seeing Raveau pass at that moment would have said:

“There is a man who had too heavy an absinthe.”

His interview with the Commissaire had, however, not ended with the exit of the crying baby. For more than an hour longer that official had explained to him, in his private office, his new duties. He was to report before the Chief of the detective service on the morrow. They had decided to send him to Tours after Bradley. In fact, it was from there they had recently received a slight clue concerning the long-looked-for bank murderer. No one under the circumstances was better fitted for his identification and arrest than Raveau, with his intimate knowledge of Bradley, the country of Tourraine, and its people. He would leave Babette with her father, he told himself, and get to

work on the case at once. He would know Tours as he had never known it before. He would find Bradley (alias Clifford) if it was possible for any man to find him. He had known Bradley well—well enough to know the weak points and habits of the man, as well as he had known Podonoff (alias Vremer). The clue from Tours was slight, but it did not discourage him. Nothing discouraged him now. His whole heart and soul now had but one aim in life: to serve to his utmost ability the police who had befriended him, even at the risk of his life. So engrossed was he in his thoughts that he forgot about Babette, or that it was long after luncheon hour. He was too nervous, too happy, too much overwhelmed by the events of the morning, to ride home. He walked—walked on, lost in his thoughts, tingling with gratitude and pride, elated by his great good fortune.

For the first time in his life he looked back upon his old profession with a feeling of pride and satisfaction. He told himself as he went up the rue de Clichy, and turned into the rue Ballu, that had it not been for his long experience as a crook among crooks this great good fortune would never have come to him.

As he crossed the Place Vintimille, and gained the rue Fontaine, the absolute confidence the police had placed in him again reverted to his mind. The very thought of it exhilarated him. He stopped to regard himself in the mirror of a jeweller's window reflecting a shelf full of cheap rings and brooches.

"You lucky old rat!" he said to himself.

The haggard pallor of the morning had vanished as if by magic. He saw himself younger, and could not help smiling at his own image. "You are no longer an outcast," he told this image; "you are somebody; you are no longer hounded. They have invested power in you. You have a right to arrest."

To arrest!

The word, much as its grave importance and responsibility meant to him, touched him from its humorous side. He grinned.

By the time he had reached the square d'Anvers he was conscious he was singing, that Babette was waiting for him, anxious to know the result of the sale of his pictures.

What would he tell her?

The truth, he decided. The truth without the past. He was his old, nerveless, confident self again now, ready for any emergency.

"I shall tell her," he decided, "that the police have come to me, owing to my wisdom and knowledge of life; that they have made me a member of the detective service; that I am a detective of the Secret Police under orders; that we are to go immediately to Touraine, that I may ferret out an important affair." He smiled to himself as he passed the cat in the courtyard, at the thought of what his old pal Pantin would say. True, he was owner of the hotel whose small gains since its completion had lately worried him. Nothing worried him now. He sprang up the stairs past good old Bara's door to his own and started to

drive his key into the lock, but Babette, hearing his step, was too quick for him. He opened the door to her smooth, bare, young arms.

"Ah! my dearest!" she sighed, as he released her. "I am so glad to get you back. Have you eaten—tell me the truth, have you?"

"Not a mouthful," he laughed.

She frowned.

"It was not nice of you. You will be ill."

"And you?"

She nodded to their table and the remainder of the sausage, salad, and cheese.

"I had plenty," she declared. "Come, my dearest, you must eat. Then you must tell me all. Did the gentleman buy one or two?"

"He bought nothing, my little one," he laughed as he poured out a glass of wine and drew the salad-bowl toward him.

"Nothing!" exclaimed Babette. "And after all his enthusiasm, he—he bought nothing?"

Her smile vanished, and the corners of her rosy mouth drooped under her sudden disappointment.

Then her heart went out to him.

"You must not be discouraged, my beloved," she declared. "It will be for another time. You are not discouraged, tell me?"

Her smooth arms went about his neck.

"Discouraged? Do I look discouraged? If you only knew how happy I am!"

"I do not understand," she faltered, "since the

gentleman did not buy. Most gentlemen who come to buy pictures, Monsieur Bara says, are like that. They talk a great deal. One never can count on them. But he—I was certain you would sell him the little one he liked.”

“He never bought a picture in his life,” declared Raveau. “Wait,” he said, checking her surprise. “Do you know who that gentleman was?”

“How should I, my Pierre, since he did not even give us his name?”

“That gentleman is Monsieur Guinard, one of the chief detectives of the Secret Police.”

Babette drew back with a start.

“Oh, Pierre!—one of the police! Mon Dieu! of the police! Why did he come here? Why, my dearest, tell me? Oh, Pierre, tell me—what has happened! Pierre, I am so frightened!”

She sank upon her knees, and burying her face in his lap, burst into tears.

“My little Babette, are you not foolish? Come, my beloved, look at me. There! you see how happy I am. There is nothing to fear. Much has happened, my darling.”

“Pierre! I do not understand—it is all so strange.”

“How often have you told me I am wise,” he smiled. “That I know everything.”

“It is because it is true,” she declared, kissing his hand.

“It is because you love me,” he said tenderly. “I have seen much in life—of people, from the best

to the worst. Monsieur Guinard did not wish you to know either his identity or the purpose of his visit, but he came here for me to help him—it will surprise you—but his companions—the police—wish me to become one of them.”

“Pierre! it is so strange, what you say.”

“They have appointed me to a position of honour among them, of distinguished honour, which I have accepted.”

She crept into his lap.

“Their profession has always interested me,” he continued. “I have never told you, but I have had for years a longing to become one of them. Only, my little one, these rare positions are difficult to obtain. They are not given to the first comer or to every one, either.”

“I should think not,” she breathed with pride, “only you are so wise, so wonderful, Pierre. It is not strange that they want you.”

“In the first place,” he resumed, “we are to give up this little place and go immediately to——”

He stopped and drew her snugly into his arms.

“Where, Pierre? Tell me,” she questioned excitedly.

“To prison,” he said sternly.

“Pierre!”

He felt her tremble.

“Yes, indeed—to prison. Oh! it is a very dreadful place. It is here,” he went on rapidly, imitating the voice and gestures of Monsieur Pivot, “that the

four holy fathers were confined—yes, ladies and gentlemen.”

She raised herself in his arms with a puzzled look.

“And there, over there, is the oubliette—that into which one falls and is forgotten”—his voice became low and dramatic—“even ladies were tortured here, *Mélice d’Anjou*——”

“*Pierre!*” she cried, both hands on his shoulders. “To papa? It is true? Oh, you naughty one to have frightened me so!”

“After a day or so I shall leave you with your father, for I must be in Tours and elsewhere. They pay me well for my services; we shall no longer have to economize.”

She kissed him.

“I am so proud of you,” she sighed. “How wonderful! I shall tell every one that my husband is now——”

“Babette! you will tell no one.”

He spoke so sharply that she drew back.

“No one, do you understand? Not even your father.”

“Not even papa?”

“Not even papa. I am speaking seriously. Since I belong now to the Secret Police, you must never—listen to me, my dearest—you must never mention it to a soul. Promise me, Babette. To let people know who I am—a detective—would cause serious trouble. Promise me, Babette.”

"I promise you, Pierre—never to a soul—not even papa."

"And now, my little rabbit, you will put on your best dress, and we shall dine at the Père Boivin's."

"No, Pierre; it is too dear there," she protested, looking up at him seriously.

"Nonsense!" he laughed. "We shall have an excellent little dinner—a bottle of Musigny, a cold langouste, and a 'poulette en cocotte.' We have had too many dinners under the skylight. Your hands are getting red with housework. I shall tell the concierge to-night we are to leave. Come along! to the Père Boivin's! We are entitled to a little fête."

"You are so dear to me!" she whispered in his ear, and flew to dress.

Two days later found them climbing the prison hill with Pantin and Monsieur Pivot. Little in La Fourche had changed. Barbouche and the "Cat," Madame Poulet and the Mère Truchard were all quite as they had left them. Monsieur Pivot's joy in having his daughter and Raveau with him can be imagined, and the Mère Truchard's delight as she welcomed them at the prison gate was as tearful as it was genuine. There had been little news. The weather had been "capricious." "Alas!" Pantin confessed, "the guests in the hotel had been as rare as the days it had not rained." For weeks the prison had not known a prisoner, and there had been few visitors.

They spent that night in their own hotel, but when on the morrow Raveau left for Tours, Babette returned to her father's roof and the little white-washed room, with its memories and the crucifix, and the patchwork quilt, and the rays of the rising sun glowing in a bar of fire across her wall—the little room that had sheltered her as a child and which now sheltered her as a wife—the wife of a member of the Secret Police. A secret which was as safe with her as it was with Raveau.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

WHAT was he doing in Tours—this gentleman with gray hair, a fine profile, and clear brown eyes? What had he been doing for weeks, in fact—this handsome middle-aged man of leisure; who could often be seen loitering among the passengers at the big railroad station and who never took a train, who strolled about the department stores and purchased nothing; who lunched, breakfasted, or dined, frequently at one of the principal hotels, where the waiters were more immaculate than the dusty auto tourists they served; this gentleman, who might sometimes have been encountered in the best cafés and the worst dives in Tours; this personage, who was everywhere and nowhere, who appeared and disappeared, and whom some were confident was an Englishman, a nobleman unhappy in love. A retired officer seeking rest after a campaign, or a solitary traveller, whom, for some unknown reason, Tours had captivated and held within her gates? A man evidently with money and plenty of time to spare. A widower? A bachelor? A student of history? An architect, studying the details of the great cathedral?—for he often spent hours within it with his sketch-book—all these were conjectures which those who saw

him conceived, and none of which was true. Even a woman named Lili, whose opium rooms were clandestinely renowned, difficult as they were to find and enter, was wrong in her opinion.

It was partly advice from headquarters, partly his own knowledge of the man he was seeking, partly—and a large part—the woman Lili—a tall, silent blonde, with a strong bunch of keys in the pocket of her striped petticoat, which was of silk and expensive—that kept this gentleman in Tours. This woman, who, drunk with the drug she sold, dropped a word one night that held her listener in grateful slavery. Indeed, it appears Raveau fell deeper than this, since he cleverly allowed the woman to fall in love with him, and when a public woman falls in love—beware!

The house in which this woman lived was shadowed by the gothic towers of the cathedral by day, and further protected by an alley, a password, and three locked doors at all times, and possessed no less than two entrances and three exits. Ostensibly, judging from its exterior, it was a neat glove shop, though it is doubtful if a pair of gloves were sold from it in a week. In reality, it was an opium joint. Lili directed them both. One thing was plain: the clue concerning Bradley was a far more definite one than had first been imagined. There was no doubt that Bradley had been a frequent visitor at Lili's, or that he had left Tours with the firm intention of returning—far more than a visitor, judging from an indisputable photograph of him, hidden in a small gold locket

on the woman's neck. It took some days of careful watching to open this locket, and it was only one night, after weeks of careful watching, when the woman Lili lay numb under the lethargy of her sixth pipe, that Raveau managed to insert his thumb nail into the keepsake, and, opening it, regarded the portrait it inclosed without arousing more than a half incoherent protest from its owner.

"Who's that?" asked Raveau languorously, bending over the half-closed eyes of Lili.

"A friend," she finally articulated thickly.

"Jim Clifford, your friend?" came his reply.

"Friend," she repeated drowsily, "friend." Her red lips widened with an attempt to laugh—a sleepy laugh that mocked him, and had no meaning. She stretched her long self, and, slowly turning upon her side, passed into a realm of dreams unconscious now of the man on the mat by her side, cooking a fresh pill, which he feigned to smoke before three clients, two middle-aged women and a man, already well under the influence of the drug. It was not until morning paled, and Lili stirred herself to a fresh pipe, that he questioned her further, rousing her to listen by his insistence, and Lili was in no fit condition to listen to any one that morning. But he gathered from her facts that were indisputable: that it was Bradley, alias "Clifford," who had furnished the money for the "dope blind," including the glove shop; that Bradley would return. *That*, Lili guaranteed him. Possibly Sunday. He had

been gone two weeks. That was not his habit, she confessed—it was an exception.

“Let me sleep!” she demanded, seeking to end the conversation. “You are not jealous, you?” she ventured.

“Jealous!” exclaimed Raveau; “jealous of an old pal like Jim Clifford!”

“You know Jim?” she questioned slowly, the vague look still in her eyes.

“Jim Clifford? Of course. For over fifteen years—an old pal of mine,” he repeated.

“He’s a brute!” she murmured drowsily. She drew a deep breath and fell asleep again on the mat. One hand closed over the locket at her throat, the other pillowing her cheek, blanched from the drug, her small red mouth half open.

When Raveau left the house in the alley that morning he carried away with him facts which thrilled him with satisfaction. The fact that Bradley, alias “Clifford,” would return in a few days was almost a positive certainty.

Sunday passed with no sign of Bradley. On Tuesday, however, a man sat lunching alone at a small table in a corner of the big dining-room in one of the best hotels in Tours—a man who at a distance might have passed as a gentleman, but who at close range impressed you with all the attributes of his villainous character; a man nearly a head taller than Raveau, whose powerful, sloping shoulders supported a straight bull-like neck and a round bullet-like head,

the hair close-cropped to the coarse ears; he was flat-featured, clean-shaven, with eyes of a rat, and the square jaw of a fighter; big, muscular hands, big feet, and his formidable body clothed in a suit of soft black cheviot, deep mourning being indicated by a black four-in-hand neatly knotted under the square jaw, and a pair of black kid gloves lying upon the vacant chair opposite him, tucked in the rim of a black derby hat, circled with a broad black band.

He had finished his "hors d'œuvres" and was scanning the *Matin*, when the figure of a man approaching his table caused him to lay aside his paper, half rise from his chair, stretch forth a big hand in silent greeting, give a brusque order to the waiter to remove his hat and gloves, and with that unmistakable manner of a man who had been waiting for a friend to lunch with him, a friend who had evidently been detained past the appointed hour, indicate the vacant chair opposite him to his guest, glance again at the menu as his guest unfolded his napkin, and, running an eye as bright as a snake's over the wine list, decide upon a bottle of Vouvray, to be followed by one of Pommard, and raise his finger to the waiter.

Thus far he had not spoken a word. When he opened his lips, it was in his own American English, in a low-pitched, measured tone.

"How is business?" he began, in a voice that was inaudible six feet from the table.

"Bad, Jim," returned Raveau. "The old game ain't what it used to be."

"You're gittin' old, Pierre. You've lost yer grit, eh?"

Clifford emitted a laugh. Few men could laugh like Clifford; its sound was "er—er—er"—the cruel lips parted, but no smile accompanied it.

"I ain't complainin'," he went on. "As I told you this morning, we guys have got to hustle nowadays for a real job—anything big and fat I mean. Crackin' the swag box ain't what it used to be. Let the big work go to hell, I say—understand? I ain't had a big night's work in ten years. A guy has got to be as quick as a weasel. When I was thirty I could stack up alongside the best of 'em! Gittin' old—liver and heart's gone bad. Forty yards and I'm winded. Besides, where're you goin' to find a side partner nowadays like Lou Vermille, like young Charley Baeder, like 'the Baron?' Well, even 'the Baron' got to shyin' when there was a wench to put away easy. I never seen a guy with more sentiment for the ladies. Wonder he didn't shy the coop while we was workin', and come back with a bottle of salts for her and a doctor. Ask old Blink Ryerson, if you ever run across him, about the night we done the trick in Manchester. I thought he'd die laughin' when he seen 'the Baron' handle the dame."

The sudden appearance of the Vouvray and a sizzling sole, smothered in a cream sauce of "crawfish," made him cease speaking.

With the remainder of the luncheon, which included a thick chateaubriand, there came another

bottle of Pommard, which Raveau insisted on ordering, and which Clifford was loath to refuse, as willing in fact as he was to allow his guest to pay the bill in the end.

"Say, what's become of Pantin?" resumed Clifford when both the waiter and the cellar-man had disappeared.

"Dead—died in Australia," declared Raveau.

"Dead?" ejaculated the veteran crook, straightening back heavily in his chair.

"When did that wise old guy cash in? But, say, he could certainly mould the coin! We was together in Chicago."

He bent forward and passed his hand over his bullet-like head, upon which two scars were scarcely visible.

"See here," he resumed confidentially, "I've got somethin' neat for you, if you'll only take it—take it square—gentleman to gentleman—work in with intelligence," he added, the Pommard flushing his sodden cheeks. "Ask Lil—she'll tell you. I'm no guy to string you, and you know it. But I need a good looker like you to pull the trick."

"Jim, I'm gettin' old," smiled Raveau. "An all-night job nowadays would put me off my feed for a week."

"It's easy graft," declared Clifford, with conviction. "With two good lookers like you and Lil, it's like findin' money. Er—er—er"—the laugh escaped him again. "Let's go up to Lil's—" he

coaxed thickly, planting his big fists on the table, while Raveau paid the bill. "I've got dope enough in that shack to drug half of Toulon, and when you get hold of the real merchandise as far away from a port as this, you're goin' some, son. That's a neat plant of mine, Pierre," he added, as he rose heavily from his chair, his hard face purple from the Pommard.

On the early morning of the next day a man lay past all consciousness, or even a vestige of defence, on a mat above the glove shop, behind a locked door—a man whose big feet were bound and whose great hands were handcuffed, and who had lain throughout this humiliating operation under the drug he sold without a protest; a man who would have shot, strangled, and killed had he been in his senses. The woman, Lili, had gone first under the guidance of two agents of police. Jim Bradley, alias "Clifford," still lay there, in a draught in fact, for all the windows above the glove shop were wide open to let out the sweet stench of a drug that is sold the world over. Presently they carried him away in the trail of the woman—a trail which led to a cell opposite Lili at police headquarters in Tours.

Half an hour later a telegram was flashed to Paris:

Got Bradley. Prisoner leaves with Lafont and myself morning express.

[Signed]

RAVEAU.

And that was the end of Jim Bradley, for they hanged him in England.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

STRANGE things had happened in La Fourche—strange things indeed. Barbouche had, even Monsieur le Curé declared, become a sober citizen, and the “Cat” an honest cobbler, whose snug little shop peeping out askew upon the market-place was seldom idle. The Mère Truchard had grown too rheumatic to milk her cows, and Monsieur Pivot was no longer orator and jailer, his position of mayor, which he held with dignity and the entire satisfaction of La Fourche, being now under the jurisdiction of another, as was likewise the hotel of the imprisoned lady and the unfortunate duke. Monsieur Pivot now lived in Paris with his daughter, his grandchild, and his distinguished son-in-law, in an apartment on the Avenue de la Grande Armée, an avenue whose title is befitting to an old soldier, and where good old Bara was ever a welcome guest. Pantin, too, had gone his way, but where no one knew.

It was spring again. Late one afternoon an automobile found shelter at the Cerf Noir, the three occupants of which were soundly welcomed by Madame Poulet—especially one, a little tot of

five whom that good soul half smothered with kisses. Later in the twilight three figures might have been seen climbing the prison hill.

"Let us go in," said Raveau, as they drew near the old gate, agap on its hinges.

They entered the garden—their garden of memories, a riot of weeds now—peered into the antechamber veiled in cobwebs, glanced into the empty little whitewashed bedroom, into Monsieur Pivot's, over whose sodden floor sprouted velvety patches of fungi, peeked into the dark dungeon with the telltale window, and retraced their way to the open gate. Below it to the right, screened by the thicket, they found again the grassy spot beneath the stark and forbidding towers, and for a long while they sat there gazing below them at the sleepy, red-roofed village and the peaceful river, golden in the evening haze.

Three old crows winged over them, crossing garrulously to their refuge in the big towers.

It grew chill with the deepening twilight, and she drew closer in his arms.

"Pierre!"

"What, my dearest?"

"We must not stay too late—it is damp here—Babette will catch her death of cold. Come, my darling!" she called to the fair-haired little girl of five, whose eyes were brown and who, having strayed nearly to the thicket, was busily engaged in picking a bouquet of weeds and dandelions.

"Babette! Come, my little rabbit!"

"Oh, mamma! Come and see the beautiful toad!" pleaded Babette, and she followed the toad of all beauty into the thicket until Raveau rescued her, and brought her back by her small hand, persuading her to part with half of the precious bouquet.

Again for a moment they lingered as they had done in that twilight of long ago, and far beyond the horizon of lush fields and sweeter blossoms lay the "great world."

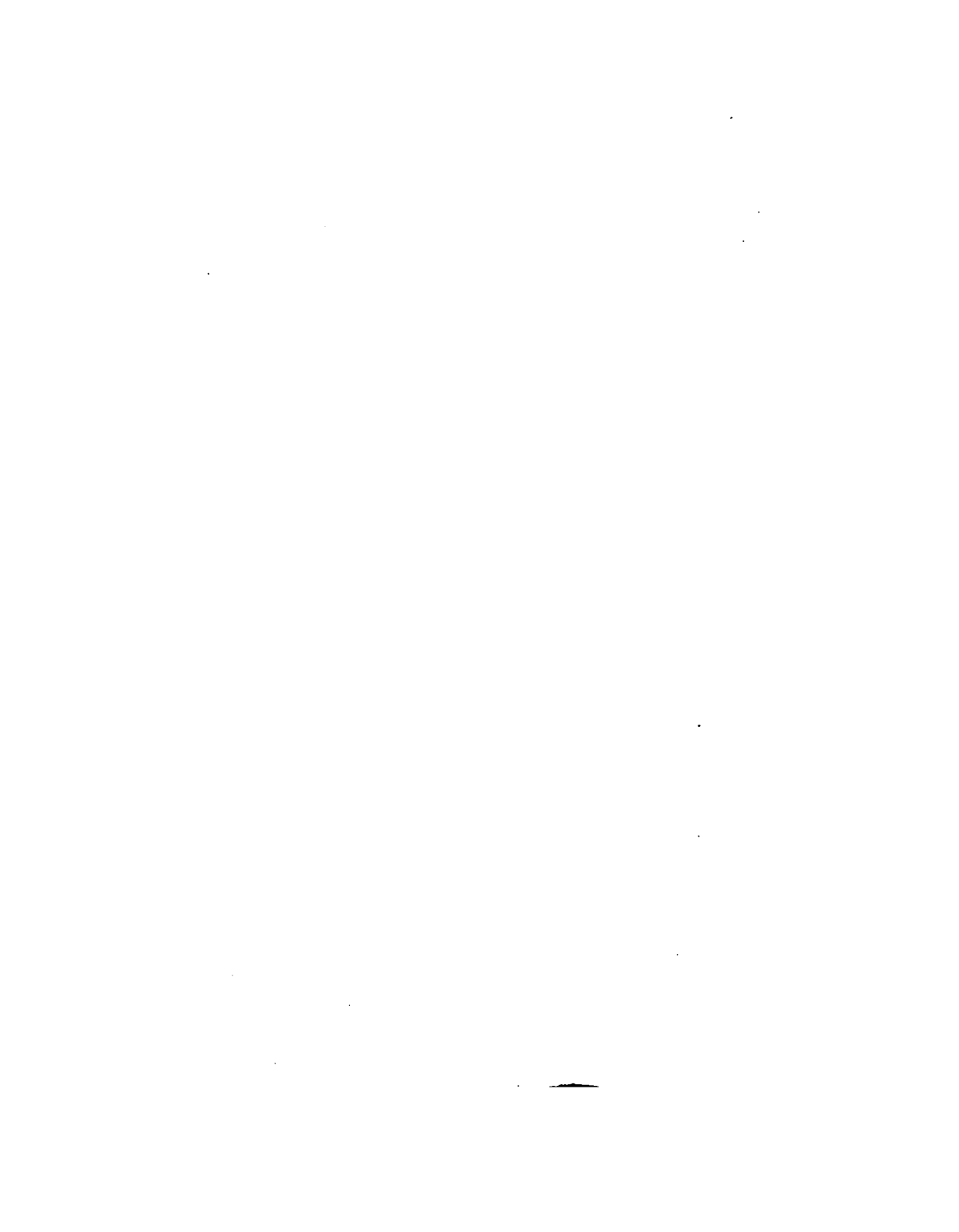
"There is your great world," he murmured, "off there. If it is your wish we shall go back to-morrow."

He felt her shudder.

"You are my world, Pierre!" she whispered in his ear.

THE END

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